さくら荘の
2
ペットな彼女
鴨志田一
Hajime Kamoshida
イラスト 溝口ケージ
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電撃文庫

神田空太（かんだ そらた）

水明芸術大学付属高校普通科二年で、ましろ当番。
ゲームクリエイターを目指し、メーカー主催の
企画オーディションに挑戦することに。101号室の住人。

椎名ましろ（しいな）

美術科の二年生。世界的な天才画家だが、
漫画家を目指しており、デビューが決まる。
非常識行動&天然扇情発言は相変わらず。
さくら荘202号室の住人。

青山七海（あおやま ななみ）
普通科の二年生で、空太のクラスメイト。
バイト代で自活しながら声優養成所に通っている。
一般寮の家賃を滞納し、さくら荘に引っ越してくることに。
「か、神田君……」
「違う、青山、これは！」

かみいぐさ　みさき
上井草美咲
美術科の三年生。特待生としての実力を持ちながら、
アニメばかりを作り権利を剥奪された変人。
幼なじみの三鷹仁に想いを寄せている。201号室在住。
「上井草先輩！準備運動くらいしてください！」
「……」
「ななみん歓迎水泳大会を開催するんだも～ん！」

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デザイン●T

Prologue

I've always thought a mundane everyday life was boring.

Until I came to Sakurasou.

If nothing was happening

I often blamed it on others.

Until I met her.

But it wasn't always true

If determined enough, the world changes its colours quickly.

If I try to change it myself, it would be enough

Sakurasou was a blend of differences.

It certainly wouldn't change in the future.

That, I continue to believe.

Chapter 1 - Speaking of Summer, Isn't It about Mountains and Seas?

Part 1

When the clouds covered the moon, the room became slightly dimmer.

Room 101 of Sakura Dorm. In the middle of it, the owner of the room Sorata Kanda was facing Shiina Mashiro, who was exuding an elegant atmosphere. Slightly raised eyes. Soft and silky hair. Clear and clean skin. There was nothing negative that could be said about her.

"Sorata."

As her thin lips called out his name, Sorata became teary.

"I have never done it before."

Mashiro's brave confession filled the room with silence. Even the cicadas that were chirping noisily during the day couldn't be heard. They were able to hear their own breathing.

"Ah, right."

Sorata wiped away the sweat from his forehead with his t-shirt.

Today it reached the highest temperature of the year, so even after sunset it didn't show any signs of cooling down. Even Mashiro's fair skin was dyed light pink due to the heat.

"Please be gentle."

"Going all the way to the finish might be too much, so I'll do what I can."

"No."

"Why you..."

"It would be troublesome if you stop half way."

"But..."

"If it's Sorata, it's ok... Do it to the end."

Mashiro's eyes which were focused on Sorata showed no hint of hesitation in them, and she looked determined to see it to the end.

"I, I got it."

Mashiro, who looked so fragile like an ice sculpture actually had a will of iron and wouldn't back down easily. So Sorata had to give up.

"When you want to stop, just say so. There's no need to overdo it."

"Since it's Sorata who's doing it, it's ok."

"If you so say so, I won't stop then. Well, show me then."

Her emotionless eyes started to show signs of hesitation.

"Sorata... you're so straight forward."

"It can't be helped."

"But I don't like sudden things."

"What are you saying now?"

"But..."

"Ah~, how frustrating."

"How embarrassing."

"Give it a rest! As if you feel embarrassed about it!"

"Do you really want to see it?"

"Whatever, just give me your failed answer sheet! You need to study for your re-test tomorrow don't you?!"

Ah, thought Sorata. Why did things end up like this?

Starting today, it was supposed to be a joyous summer break. This paradise was right

in front of him, yet it felt like he had been tackled by someone.

It was because Mashiro Shiina wasn't good at studying. It was also because of Chihiro Sengoku, who abandoned her job as teacher for a rendezvous, thus pushed aside bothersome things onto Sorata. That reason was quite clear.

But knowing that didn't change the situation. So, Sorata sighed. The only thing he could do right now was to sigh…

It all started on that morning… or rather, the afternoon of the first day of summer break, when Sorata woke up from a dream where he was forced to eat a hot pot[1].

The intense sunlight coming in from the window was burning his skin, and if that wasn't enough, there were 7 cats that were lying on top of his arms, legs and stomach, drenching him in sweat.

"I nearly dried out…"

He pushed the cats aside and got up. The cats cried out their complaints in unison, but he ignored them.

He took off his sweaty top, and looked up at the sky where the sun was casting its rays from the southern sky. He cursed at it, knowing that it was meaningless to do so, but he felt a little better that way.

Just standing up drew sweat from all over his body.

Even when he tried to cool himself with a fan, only warm air came to him, thus it wasn't relieving at all.

He soon gave up and changed into a new t-shirt. As he was about to leave for the kitchen to replenish his hydration level, someone forcefully opened the door.

Thanks to that, Sorata shared a passionate kiss with the door.

"What are you doing, Misaki-Senpai! That was my first!"

He shouted even before checking who the intruder was.

At the open door, the tenant from room 201 of Sakurasou who was making a devious face, was the 3rd year arts student, Misaki Kamiigusa. Behind her, she was hiding

something long.

“Tada~! It’s finished Kohai-kun!”

What Misaki had brought out and spread open was a poster sized paper. It was a calendar with the dates from today until the end of August.

“It’s the plan for having a happier summer than anyone else!”

- 21st of July「Search for a Tsuchinoko[2].」

Even from day one, there was something written on it that he would want to avoid at all costs.

Not only that, there were things like「Develop a UFO」,「Sashimi[3] party」,「Go fishing for whales」,「Shake down a poplar tree」and「Win an Iron Man Triathlon」all of which were either impossible to do or impossible to understand. To sum it up, the schedule of summer break was filled with ridiculous items.

But this wasn't something to be surprised about. Misaki’s inhumane ability to accomplish anything she planned was her true power. Sorata had to do something about it, and fast.

“And then if we go to the green mountains and the seven seas, it would be perfect!”

“Is it just me or does that sound a lot like someone’s name[4]? Well that aside…”

Sorata took the calendar from Misaki, scrunched it up and threw it in the bin.

“Ah~, what are you doing~! I’ve been planning this out for the last three months!”

“I’ll be returning back home during the break, so I can’t participate.”

“Not possible! Chihiro said that Kohai-kun had an important reason not to go back!”

“Didn’t that teacher just say it out of randomness?”

“I didn’t randomly say it.”

Behind Misaki, Chihiro was standing there all dressed up for some meet-up. She had make up on and a slightly short skirt. Her acts of trying to hold on to her long vanished

youthful 20s look were clearly apparent to Sorata, and he felt pity for her.

“I bestow upon you my prophecy: You can’t go back home. By your own will, you will remain at Sakurasou.”

“What?”

“Then let’s make lots of memories together, Kohai-kun. The plan is sketched out!”

For someone to handle Misaki, even having a mechanical body wouldn’t be enough to last. They would be put through the impossible every day. He wanted to avoid that at all costs.

“Senpai, aren’t you going back home?”

“What shall I do?”

“Answer me properly!”

“Not going~. Jin’s staying behind, and he also said that the screenplay was nearly completed. As soon as it’s finished I want to produce it straight away. I already have the general outline planned out.”

In a normal conversation, saying all that may sound absurd but Misaki had animated her childhood friend Jin Mitaka’s screenplays before. Her works were always well received by critics, and she was hailed as a god among her fans.

Though, he’d seen her working all-nighters for her anime, up to a point where she would be about to faint, and he found it to be quite amazing. It was really hard to think of her as a human. An alien was really different from normal humans. She was operating on a different power source than Sorata.

“So Jin senpai is also staying behind… hm.”

“He must have a girl that he doesn’t want to see in his home town.”

Although Chihiro said it without much thought, she was spot on. Jin probably didn't want to see his ex-girlfriend Fuuka, who was Misaki’s older sister. Now that he thought about it, Jin didn't return last summer or during winter break. as far as Sorata could remember, because Jin looked after the cats while he was away.

“What about you, Sensei?”

“Why would I go just to listen to my parents saying「I want to see my grandchild soon」or「We’ve raised her wrong」or「I can’t die even if I wanted to」.”

“I see…”

When someone turns thirty, they must have deal with things that a teenager couldn’t even imagine about.

“That aside, do you have anything planned today?”

“Do you really think that I had nothing planned out for the day?”

“I asked because I didn’t know.”

The art teacher who lived in the caretaker’s room was like that from the start. Her words and actions were always rough. She did whatever she wanted to, and said whatever she wanted to. He had never seen her do her job properly, including her role as the supervisor of the problem students living in Sakurasou. It was better than having someone bossing you around with the chores though.

“Help Mashiro with her retest.”

“What?”

“Your summer holidays are on hold until she gets a passing grade, so do your best.”

“Yay! Kohai-kun! Your home is far away now!”

“Sensei, please explain the situation. At least do that much!”

Chihiro put on a face that said that she couldn’t be bothered with such a thing.

“Mashiro failed her semester tests. You know that if you don’t pass your retests, you won’t advance to the next grade right?”

“I know that, but I have my own plans!”

“What, it’s probably not important anyway. You don’t need something like that. Your youth is quite bleak. Who said that one’s youth was bright? It should be referred to as

being dark instead."

"Yeah, that's right. I scored Kohai-kun's summer!"

Then it really will become a dim youth.

"Why do I need to hear that from you as well! Are you the devil?! And Senpai, don't agree with her!"

"What are you saying, idiot Kohai-kun! I'll curse you and your descendants~!"

Misaki ran out of the room, saying that while poking out her tongue. He felt really tired.

"For someone like you, without a plan for the holidays, should actually be grateful that I'm giving you something to do. Cry with joy."

"If I start crying with joy over something like that, that would mean that there's something seriously wrong with my brain!"

"You're Mashiro's master. So look after her till the end. Stop whining about it, you're not an elementary school student anymore."

"Don't talk about your cousin like she's some sort of pet! I need to go home to Fukuoka by tomorrow."

"What?"

"What do you mean what?"

"If you're starting to miss your mother's milk, then I won't stop you. If you're going to go back home, then take Mashiro with you."

"Say what?"

"Who's going to look after Mashiro while you're gone? Stop being so unreasonable.

"Who's the one that's being unreasonable! No matter how you look at it, taking Shiina back home with me is just strange! What is this punishment game?!"

Taking Mashiro back to his hometown. Just thinking about it gave him the creeps. How

would his family look at him.

“Who cares. Just introduce her as your lovely girlfriend who you have an intimate relationship with. Her looks are quite good, so your parents will be in tears saying that she’s too good for you.”

“Why would they be in tears? Anyways, 「when」, 「where」, 「how」 did we even have an intimate relationship?!”

“How would I know? I have no interest in your private life. You can do it whenever and wherever you want, like you always do.”

“Don’t just assume that we have an intimate relationship!”

“Stop talking back to me. You’re really hard to please.”

“Whose fault do you think that is?!”

“If you don’t want to tell them about your intimate relationship, then just tell them to expect the birth of their grandchild.”

“That’s even worse than having an intimate relationship!”

“It’s hot to begin with, but are you going to make me even more so?”

“It’s because you’re making my blood pressure go up!”

“Well, I leave Mashiro’s retests to you.”

“When it comes to studying, Misaki-Senpai or Jin-Senpai are much better at it.”

Even as he said the names of the two third year students living at Sakurasou, Chihiro didn’t seem to care at all.

Their personalities were a bit of a problem, but the tenant in room 201 was Misaki Kamiigusa, who had never lost her position as the dux [5] ever since she entered the school. Her childhood friend and the tenant of room 103 was the emperor of sleepovers, Jin Mitaka, who always maintained his position in the grade rankings. Both of them managed to secure a position at the Suimei Arts University with their 1st semester grades of their third year. Misaki was planning on doing visual media and Jin was planning on doing literature.

Compared to them, Sorata had a very average grade. He never failed any tests, but he was just average.

“At least you can talk with some common sense.”

“You should try the same, Sensei.”

“There’s no way Kamiigusa can teach other people. Do you think that humanity could handle that?”

“Please trust in your students more! Don’t give up on humanity!”

“What’s impossible is impossible. If something cannot be done, then it just cannot be done.”

“Is that something an educator should say?!”

“But it’s much better than telling lies. When you face society after growing up in a place where they treat you nicely, you’ll just run into trouble and your spirit would be easily broken. It’s good to know the extent of one’s abilities.”

“Do you have something against the world or something? Is it just because you’re not married yet?”

“Kanda. Do you know how people become murderers?”

Chihiro’s eyes thinned and became cold and hard.

“Who, who knows. Anyways, if Misaki-Senpai is no good, then there’s Jin-Senpai! He’s still in the dorm, so I’ll go and ask him.”

“Mitaka in a room alone with a girl would only teach her how to make a baby. Don’t you know anything?”

“What do you think of your own students?! Even Jin-Senpai wouldn't… No, there is a possibility… I think… or maybe not. No, there is!”

“Did I really need to explain the reason to you? Make your brain work faster; otherwise you won’t grow up to be a smart person.”

“Don’t say such harsh things to me. Actually, you can teach her, sensei!”

“What? Are you drunk? I told you I have a meet-up tonight.”

“You didn't tell me! Though, I can tell by the way that you’re dressed.”

“Ah, really? Today’s concept is of a cute girl.”

Chihiro proudly gave him a wink.

Rather than a cute girl, she looked like the devil, but Sorata didn't let that come out of this mouth.

“Here, this is the schedule for the retests.”

“Yes…”

He grabbed the paper Chihiro took out by reflex. It looked like there were 9 tests over 2 days. And the dates were…

“Tomorrow?!”

And it was the day after as well.

“Do your best.”

“Sensei, are you stupid? Why are you only telling me about this now?!”

“Isn’t that obvious? There was that rookies award, so Mashiro wasn’t in the mood for studying, and you also looked unwell. I was being considerate of you guys, be grateful.

“… Ah~, that’s it. I’m just tired now.”

“Complain to Mashiro. I wasn’t the one who failed the test. Oh, look at the time. I booked an appointment at a hair salon before the meeting. I leave the rest to you.”

Chihiro put on her shoes and without waiting for Sorata to answer, she ran out of the door. Hot air blew towards Sorata who’d been left behind.

After finishing that talk, Sorata pushed his job to teach Mashiro away for now.

After Chihiro went out, Sorata fed the cats while also filling up his empty stomach, and went to Mashiro's room after mustering up the courage to face the reality.

He knew that he wouldn't get a response if he knocked on the door, so he just silently opened it. As soon as he opened the door, his entire vision was filled with nothing but whiteness. He couldn't understand what had happened for a moment.

The room was as messy as usual. The floor was covered in clothes, underwear and names[6].

Mashiro was at the centre of the room. She was standing in front of a full body mirror. He could see her back. He could see her spotless skin through the gaps in her hair. Her sculptured waist line looked beautiful. Her firm buttocks greeted Sorata. She was in the state in which she was born in.

Mashiro who was sketching on a drawing paper on the easel[7] with her pen turned her head around. As soon as their eyes met, Sorata forcefully slammed the door shut.

He shouted at the door.

"What are you doing?!"

"I'm nude drawing."

"You mean you're drawing in the nude."

"I'm doing it while looking at the mirror."

"A rough sketch in the nude[8]! Why this all of a sudden!"

"My school homework."

"Is a nude drawing?!"

"Just a drawing."

"Then choose something else! Are you going to hand in a drawing of your naked body?!"

“It’s alright.”

“What is?”

“It turned out well.”

“Now isn’t the time to be worried about the quality! Aren’t you ashamed?!”

“It’s a work of art.”

“Al~right, then show me.”

“…”

“Why aren’t you replying?”

“Sorata isn’t allowed to see.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s embarrassing.”

“But didn’t you say that you weren’t ashamed because it was a work of art?”

“Sorata isn’t allowed to.”

“Why don’t you tell me the exact reasons… actually just don’t say it!”

She was probably going to answer back with a strange reason anyway. It was better to move on, rather than getting a headache.

“Anyways, draw something else. If you’re going to hand that in, I’ll stop you with all my strength.”

“… Alright.”

Her voice was soft.

“Ye-yeah… if you know now, then put your clothes on. I’ve got something to say about the retests.”

“Wait.”

He leaned against the door. Sorata took deep breaths and lowered his heart rate.

After around 5 minutes, he asked Mashiro.

“Are you nearly done?”

“Yeah.”

Being satisfied with her answer, Sorata let down his guard and opened the door.

In front of him stood a girl wrapped in a large bath towel.

“Didn’t I tell you to put your clothes on?! What will you do if my lust suddenly explodes?! It’s about to break free you know?!”

“Sorata didn’t prepare any for me.”

“Yes, I see. It was all my fault…”

“You didn’t knock either.”

“Even if I do, you don’t respond!”

“Not knocking is quite inconvenient.”

Mashiro’s face was dyed red while she was holding on to her bath towel that reached up to her chest.

“It doesn't sound very convincing coming from the person who tried to hand in a nude drawing of herself for her school work.”

Naturally, his eyes wandered over to the paper on the easel.

But before he could see it, Mashiro covered it with her back, so he couldn't get a glimpse of it.

"No."

Mashiro looked angry and puffed up her cheeks.

"Al-alright! I'll knock next time! A-anyways, about the retest!"

Sorata quickly changed the topic to shake off the awkwardness.

And he chose some suitable clothes for Mashiro to wear. When that was finished, he got her to take the answer sheet and some stationary, then brought her to his room.

By that time, the sun had already set.

In Sorata's room, the two of them sat down facing each other with a table between them.

"Take out your answer sheet."

"You won't get angry?"

"Is it something that's going to make me angry?"

"That depends on Sorata."

"You mean it depends on the score!"

"Some people do say that."

"All people say that! Never mind, just take it out."

She hesitated for a bit and took out her 9 answer sheets. The semester tests were nine in total, so that meant that she failed every single one of them.

At that point, Sorata felt like ripping his hair out. He had to teach nine subjects, but the tests were tomorrow and the day after… no matter how he looked at it, there was no time.

To make things worse, each time Sorata saw the score, his face started to lose its colour.

Japanese was 0 points…

Mathematics was 0 points…

And the rest were…

A parade of 0 points. All nine of them. Today's heroine was decided. If there was something unfortunate, it would be that the numbers weren't on a baseball score board, but on her answer sheet.

He couldn't even make a sound at the sight before him. What was he supposed to say? His brain gave up half way through.

"Were you moved?"

"I'm shocked! You have some serious talent at being an idiot."

"You're too much."

"Your head is the one that's too much."

"You promised that you won't get angry."

"I didn't get angry yet! It just feels like seeing the apocalypse."

"I want to see as well."

"You're the apocalypse itself!"

"I'm not."

"Ah, that's enough. Let's stop this conversation. But are you really OK? Did your brain get damaged? Why is English 0 points as well? Where is your pride and identity as a returnee?"

Mashiro thought with a serious face.

"Mongolia?"

"Did you drop it off during your flight?! I'm sorry, but it's not in Mongolia. It's rude to say that it's in Mongolia! Apologize to all the people in Mongolia."

“Where’s Mongolia?”

“How should I know!”

“Sorry.”

Mashiro bowed to Sorata[9].

“I’m not a Mongol.”

It was tiring. It was too tiring. To Mashiro Shiina, common sense didn't work. If he were to try to counter her every action, he would be worn out. It was pointless to do so.

“What do you study then?”

“Art studies.”

“What about something more normal like math or English?”

“Never done it.”

“Whoa~, this won’t get us anywhere.”

He knew through his previous experience that Mashiro wasn’t joking, and the 0 points were evidence of her words.

“Why don’t you take out your notes first.”

Mashiro took out a note that had ‘math’ written on it and extended it towards Sorata. But she wouldn’t let go of it when Sorata tried to take it.

“Shiina-san?”

“You won’t get angry?”

“This again?”

“That depends on Sorata.”

“You mean it depends on the note! Never mind, let it go.”

The note seemed unfamiliar in his hands.

“Isn’t this a little bit big?”

The usual paper size was B5, but Mashiro’s note was an A4.

“It’s easier to write.”

“Hm~m, well it doesn’t matter…”

As he turned the pages one by one, Sorata’s voice grew louder.

“It’s no good!”

In the notes, there was nothing related to the class material. Instead, it was filled with some names for her manga and rough character designs, or simply, her scribbles.

“What is this?! A sketch book? Is that right? You should've stopped this habit when you graduated from primary school! When you say it’s easier to write, you actually mean easier to draw, don’t you? This is why you got a zero! I don’t feel any sympathy for you! Are you listening to me?!”

“You promised.”

“That’s not my problem!”

“You’re not even a human.”

All her other notes were filled with scribbles and drawings.

“Pay more attention in class. At least show your will to study. If you don’t I’m giving up as well. And isn't it too mean to say that I’m not a human?”

There was no change in Mashiro’s attitude even when Sorata let out his feelings. She tilted her head and watched Sorata emotionlessly. It was like she was looking at an exotic animal, when the exotic animal was actually her.

Before his mood got worse, he regained his composure and tried to talk once more.

“Alright, can you promise to me that you won’t draw anymore pictures in class?”

“Whatever shall I do.[10]”

“Don’t pick up weird dialects!”

It was unfortunate that he couldn't keep his composure for longer than two seconds when talking to Mashiro.

“I learnt it from Misaki.”

“You don’t need to learn something like that! Learn what you’re supposed to! And take out your text books!”

“I don’t have them.”

“Why not?! Didn’t I tell you to bring them?”

“They’re all at school.”

“You knew that you had the retests, but you left them at school. How are you going to study?”

“I have Sorata.”

“I’m not a jack of all trades! Do I look like I’m a cat shaped robot from the future[11]?!”

“Don’t exaggerate. Watch your words.”

“Don’t critique my words! Never mind, actually, no, do mind! If you don’t pass your retest, my summer holidays will be gone.”

How many times would they need to retake the tests to pass? He really didn't think that the time would come before the end of the holidays.

“… Now then. You can do it Sorata. Don’t lose Sorata. I’m cheering for myself! Alright, why don’t we start with math.”

“You can do it.”

“You’re the one who needs to do it!”

“Sorata is really angry today.”

“Yes, of course. It must be calcium deficiency. Of course. Then the first question is… do you know how to factorize?”

“A painter and an inventor from the Edo period.”

“That’s Gennai Hiraga[12]. It doesn’t even sound anything like factorization! If you’re going to make a pun, do it properly!”

“OK, I’ll do it properly next time.”

“You don’t need to make a pun! Actually, Shiina.”

“What?”

“What do you actually know? Do you know about functions? What about algebra?”

“…”

“You at least know the times tables right?”

“Are you looking down on me?”

“Sorry for doubting you. I had to make sure.”

“That’s cooking in English.”

“That’s cooking[13]! I can’t do it anymore! It’s impossible for you to pass the retest! Your existence is a miracle! You miraculous idiot!”

“Well, not really.”

“Don’t be proud of it!”

“Why are you guys so noisy?”

Looking up, he saw Jin poking his head in through the half open door.

“Senpai, help me!”

His desperate plea must have reached Jin, because he raised his shoulders a bit and

sat on the bed. From a higher place, he looked at the questions on the table.

“I’m glad that you’re managing it well.”

“What part of this looks like it’s going well…”

“No~, if you do it as a manzai[14], then it’s pretty good isn’t it? Aim for the 10 million yen at the end of the year.[15]”

He wasn’t concerned with their situation at all. Sorata didn’t want to hear about it any further so he turned around to talk to Mashiro, but she was drawing her name on a book.

“You just promised me a little while ago!”

However, Sorata’s rage didn't even reach Mashiro who was too busy drawing. Mashiro didn't even stop her hand and look away from the book.

“You know, how is your brain structured? I really can’t understand it.”

“I have to work on the name for the serialization.”

Mashiro answered while still sketching.

“Did your editor tell you to?”

“Yep. We’re aiming for the serialization meeting next month.”

“Then you should pass your trials quickly!”

Sorata aimed for the moment when her pencil stopped moving, and he snatched the book away from Mashiro. Jin mockingly said 'not bad'.

“Manga is banned until your tests are over.”

“… I got it.”

She looked irritated, but Mashiro accepted it pretty easily.

So now, they can finally get started with studying. As soon as he thought that,

“Kohai-kun, le~t’s play!”

With Misaki’s voice, the door was broken down with a fearsome strength. Misaki looked at the faces in the room and started to accuse him.

“Huh, I was left out? Why?! Why?! You tried to push me away but now you’re all playing together by yourselves?!”

“Don’t blame me! I’m just helping Shiina study. It’s just some follow-up measures.”

Misaki hurried into the room.

“Never mind that, let’s play. It’s the summer holidays! The first day! It’s the summer holidays! The first day!”

“I would love to. But because of this critically stupid person…”

“Well, not really.”

“Don’t answer back to confirm it! What, do you like saying that about yourself?”

“Well not really.”

“You do like it!”

“Well not…”

“Stop that!”

Sorata feared that it might continue on, so he quickly stopped her.

“Ha~, like I thought.”

Jin put on a bitter face after checking the results on the test papers. It looked like he understood Sorata’s pain.

“At this rate, traditional methods won’t get you anywhere.”

“I agree. Since she’s a spectacular idiot.”

“Well not really.”

“It really is so!”

“Then just memorise all of it.”

Misaki said while starting the game by herself.

“Ah, that’s not a bad idea.”

The one who agreed with her was Jin.

“What?”

“For the students who study music or arts, they have the same questions for the retest. Didn't Kohai-kun know that? You’re too slow! Low~ low~ low~!”

“What? Really?”

He did hear before that the difficulty of the tests were different for the arts students.

“To put it bluntly, unlike the normal students who only study to pass a grade, the expectation is different for the arts students.”

“But how would you know that Misaki-senpai?”

Misaki shouldn’t have to take a retest before.

“Hauhau told me before.”

“Is that Chow Chow’s cousin?!”

“Al~right! I’ll defeat that last boss and wipe the floor with him! Just wait for me! Mha ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

“Are you going to ignore me? Is that it?”

“It’s that girl. The one who does the music for Misaki’s animation.”

“I’ve never seen her before.”

“Really? Now that I think about it, Sorata, you’ve never seen them dubbing have you?”

“No, well, I don’t really mind. But to memorise the retest…”

Was it really possible to memorise the answers for the test? He thought that it would be extremely difficult for her to memorise everything, especially the ones she has no idea about.

While Sorata was thinking to himself, Mashiro said the unexpected words.

“I’ve memorised them.”

“What?”

“I just need to memorise the answers right?”

“Well yeah.”

Sorata and Jin exchanged quick glances, but Mashiro didn’t explain herself.

“If you really memorised them, why don’t we do a little quiz?”

Following Jin’s orders, Sorata put away the answers and placed the blank answer sheet with the 0 points written on it on the table.

“You can start now.”

Mashiro nodded once, and like she was drawing, she smoothly worked with the pen. The words started to appear, and each time a question was filled out, Sorata checked it with the answers.

The first question was correct. Then the next one, and the one after was also correct. Mashiro finished the mathematics test within 5 minutes.

“How did you do it?”

“Do what?”

“Did you remember them in order?”

“No.”

“But to answer all of them just by remembering the answers, is that possible?”

The maths had the working process as well. There was a fair bit to remember. Was it really possible to remember all of it just by looking at it once?

“This is amazing.”

Jin looked pretty surprised as well.

“Sorata can do it as well.”

“How can I! I don’t have such a convenient ability.”

“Kohai-kun’s ability is picking up stray cats~.”

Misaki cut in while playing her game.

“But this is really amazing. How did you do it?”

“I can remember it after looking at it once. If I think of it as a picture.”

At Sorata’s question, Mashiro was quite calm. It sounded like something that was so natural to her.

“Well, it’s alright as long as Mashiro passes right? Then there’s no need to worry about her retest.”

“… It feels like cheating though.”

“Well, if you really want to spend your summer holidays tutoring her, I won’t stop you.”

“It’s alright even if she cheats.”

“Hey~ hey~. If you’re finished, let’s play!”

What Misaki showed them was a 4-player action battle game.

“Now, Mashiro, press the controller hard!”

Mashiro took the controller from Misaki. But when she held it something wasn’t quite right. The way she held the controller was quite unusual. She just placed her hands on it.

“Haven’t you played games before?”

“I haven’t.”

“I knew it. This is how you hold a controller.”

Sorata showed her how to actually hold the controller.

“Your thumbs go on that button up there… yeah, like that.”

She held it properly but something still felt off.

“Next, you can choose your character by moving the cursor with the stick.”

Mashiro slowly moved the cursor, looking back and forth from her hands to the screen numerous times.

“I want the gorilla! I trust in the gorilla’s strength! Gorilla is justice! Gorilla is power itself!”

“Let’s ignore the gorilla worshiper, which one do you like Shiina?”

“I like the fox.”

“Then select it by pressing the A button.”

Checking the position of the A button with her eyes, Mashiro tentatively pressed it.

Sorata thoughtlessly chose some exiled prince. Jin had already chosen a hedgehog character.

“Then the loser has to be on next week’s cleaning duty!”

“Wait! Next week was meant to be you Senpai!”

“Now, start! And fall! Fly to the other side of the universe~!”

Misaki’s gorilla slammed Sorata’s prince with a megaton punch and flew him away. Sorata’s character was sent flying and disappeared from the screen, showing only an arrow. His health was nearly smashed away.

“If you think it’s over, then think again!”

Sorata used a double jump and a teleportation skill to land his prince on the ground. But then the hedgehog that Jin was controlling rapidly rolled towards Sorata and body slammed him. And once more, Sorata’s character flew off screen.

“Ah, good work.”

“Whoa~, I’m gonna die, I’m gonna die! Are you joking, do you really think that I would die without a fight! It’s unfair only aiming for me!”

“It’s that type of a game. You’re my target in this game.”

Sorata manipulated his character to grab on to the ledge of the field.

“That was dangerous.”

His rest didn't last long, because as he jumped to get to a higher ground, a beam from afar hit him. It was from the fox character Mashiro was controlling. The poor exiled prince didn’t get to show his skills and fell to the bottom. This all happened within the first 10 seconds.

“Noooooooo?!”

“Nice, Mashiron!”

“A truly perfect combination.”

“So should I continue what I was doing just now?”

Misaki, Mashiro and Jin high fived each other.

HIT!
2P
3P
4P

“Wait! It was a trap wasn’t it? It was a trap right? Do you really want me to be the cleaner?”

“What will you do Kohai-kun? One more time?”

“Of course! I can’t accept this violence and discrimination.”

“Sorata, aren’t you good at games?”

“To hear such a thing.”

“Shut up! I won’t forgive you! I won’t go easy just because you’re a beginner! I’ll use my full strength! I’ll send all of you flying to Pluto so brace yourselves! It’s time for the final showdown!”

“Kohai-kun really likes to exaggerate.”

“This is what you always say!”

“If Kohai-kun loses again, then you have to treat us with the deluxe melon bread from Hashimoto Bakery.”

The deluxe melon bread from the bakery was rarity with only 20 made per day. They appeared on the TV or magazines before, so there are fans who travel from afar on the trains just to buy the bread, it was a given to stand in line from the morning, and the existence of the bread itself was unconfirmed. Even Sorata who lived close to the shop only ate it a few times.

“I just need to win right? I can do that much… but why did you start the game without a warning!”

“Now, dun dun!”

Because of his late reaction, Sorata’s character was hit with the gorilla’s mega punch and was turned into a star in a second.

“It looks like you’ve woke me up.”

“You’re not good.”

“Shut up!”

And so, the first day of the summer holidays at Sakurasou closed with the gaming competition which continued till the next morning.

Part 2

"Well do your best. Don't fall asleep during it."

"I'm sleepy."

"It'll be over if you sleep. But if you keep your eyes open, it'll be your victory."

"I'll try."

"I'll kill some time in my classroom, so when you finish, come and find me. Don't get lost wandering around."

"I've never got lost before."

"What kind of a mouth tells a lie like that…. Anyway, do your best for your test."

After the gaming night, Sorata and Mashiro were early at the school for her test. It was because he wasn't sure if she could go to school by herself.

Also, since they played games late into the night, they might fall asleep if they're not paying attention.

"I'll be going now."

"Yeah…. Hey Sorata."

"Yeah?"

"Why won't you call me by my name?"

"Hey! Is this the right time for it!"

It happened on the day when Mashiro's manga debut was decided. The girl, for no apparent reason, told him to call her「Mashiro」instead of「Shiina」. Who knows why she wanted it.

She didn't say anything when he continued to call her「Shiina」so he thought that it was just a onetime thing.

“Sorata”

“That’s uh…… something that you only use between people with a special relationship, and wouldn’t it be a bother if people misunderstand?”

He made a pathetic excuse. It actually didn’t matter how others viewed them, but it was Sorata who only wanted to call each other that way only if there was a special relation between them. There was no reason to call her「Mashiro」, and they didn’t have that kind of a relationship, so those thoughts circled around in his head. Also it was partially because he was too shy about it.

“There’s no-one around right now.”

Mashiro was quite straight forward, and she didn’t suspect Sorata’s lies so she didn’t dig into it. She believed his words and answered accordingly.

When she looked at him with her clear eyes, Sorata’s brain stopped working.

“Call me by my first name when there’re only two of us.”

So Sorata dug his own grave with his excuse.

“You’re really good at making people embarrassed in complicated ways.”

“……”

Mashiro tilted her head to the side to show that she didn’t understand what he meant. That was one of the actions that Mashiro does which Sorata liked. Sorata was driven to a corner with no escape.

“A, alright. I’ll do that from now.”

He wanted to escape from her as soon as possible so he was forced to promise her. It was too late to regret it.

Mashiro looked at him with great expectancy.

This was the moment. He knew it without hearing it from Mashiro.

“Then do your best for the test… Mashiro.”

Mashiro had a small smile that one might not notice unless they looked carefully. That smile quickly disappeared and her usual face appeared, and she walked to the Arts classrooms.

After parting ways from Mashiro, he himself dragged his feet toward his class. His classroom was on the same floor as the Arts classes, but since both of them were located at the ends of the hall, there was quite a distance. To regather his composure, Sorata slowly walked through the hallway.

The summer wind blew in. With it, it carried the voices of student who were having their club activities. With the sound of a fastball hitting the bat with a clang, Sorata reached his classroom.

He left his belongings on the seat that he usually used, and opened all the windows.

As he did, he noticed the shadow of someone he knew well in front of the teachers' office near the grass. The one who was talking to Takatsu-sensei, whose wife came back to him this month, was someone who had been playing games till the morning; Jin. If he had something to do at school, he could've come with them. He wondered what they were talking about. When thinking of Takatsu-sensei, he could only think of his wife, and he being Jin's guidance teacher, but Jin's career path was already decided.

As the two of them were conversing, Jin noticed Sorata and their eyes met. However it was just for brief moment and Jin looked away.

Sorata thought that he could ask later and sat on his seat.

He took out a book rest and rested his face on it. He then took out an old book. It was a text book on programming for beginners. It was a book that he borrowed from Ryuunosuke Akasaka, the game programmer who lived in room 102 of Sakurasou.

This summer, Sorata gave up on going back home and decided to spend all of his time on learning programming, and writing up a game design. His aim was to send his design to the audition「Let's make a game」.

When he had the skills, he planned to work part time as a debugger.

Fanning himself with the book rest, he flipped the page with his other hand. He still couldn't understand what was written on it. He didn't understand, but he still read it. After reading it over and over again, he thought that he understood. No, it could just be

his feeling.

“Hm~mmm…”

He felt like as if he was learning physics. It took time to understand it, and if he understood, it could be integrated into various things. On the other hand, even when he was solving a problem by using a formula, it didn’t feel right. It was that type of feeling.

“I won’t get this unless I try in real life~.”

He closed the book after reading a page of it. He learnt up to ordering the computer to solve a simple equation. But he still didn’t get how all of this was related to creating a game. When would the visual and the sounds appear?

He checked his phone that also acted as a clock and found that two hours had passed. He must’ve been reading pretty intensely.

But there was still some time left until Mashiro’s tests finished.

With some time to spare, Sorata decided to send a message to Ryuunosuke. He wanted to ask a few things related to the programming studies.

-- What are you up to?

A reply instantly came. It was always like then whenever he sent a message to Ryuunosuke.

-- At the moment, Ryuunosuke-sama is obeying his theory of「A programmer must sleep eight hours a day」and is currently asleep. So the message Sorata-sama has sent cannot be delivered. From Maid-chan who wants to sleep right next to Ryuunosuke-sama if possible.

As usual, the automatic reply program AI Maid which Ryuunosuke made seems to be in a great condition.

If he was asleep, there was no way he would be able to reply. So he could only do one thing. To kill his boredom, he decided to chat with the maid.

-- When was your first love?

The reply came back instantaneously and his phone vibrated.

-- It was 3 years ago in spring. I felt a little electrified when I first saw his face. I was born to serve this person. Ha~. I still can't forget that feeling. Ahh, Ryuunosuke-sama…. From Maid-chan who is dedicated only to Ryuunosuke-sama.

It looks like she fell in love with Ryuunosuke, the one who created her.

But it was really well made. If you used this system to create a love simulation game, it would sell like hotcakes. He should discuss it with Ryuunosuke in the future. Although, he would say that he has no interest in it.

-- Aren't you going to confess?

-- I am but a servant who serves Ryuunosuke-sama. A servant cannot have romantic feelings to their master. So I shall be happy just by being near him, and will bury these feelings deep inside my heart. From Maid-chan who is deeply in love.

It looked like the electrical maid was seriously in love, so much that Sorata couldn't even imagine. He just wanted to kill some time, but when the talk became serious all of a sudden, so he decided to throw in a comical question to lift up the mood.

-- What colour is your panties today?

What kind of an answer would come?

-- It's grey boxers. Kanda, do you enjoy asking guys about the colours of their underwear?

-- I wasn't asking you!

-- I wonder if your brain went off because of the heat.

-- No, I was asking Maid-chan!

-- Here's a trade secret. Kanda, if you call an idiot an idiot, you'll become an idiotic idiot as well.

It was filled with some nonsense.

He tried to explain himself. As he was about to press the send button, the phone

started to vibrate. Someone was calling him.

On the screen was the phone number for his house.

Now that he thought about it, he didn't tell them that he wouldn't be coming, and that's probably why they called him. He quickly sent the message and picked up the call.

"Yes."

「Not yes, brother!」

"What, it's just you Yuuko."

「Don't say what to me!」

"What do you want me to do, sister?"

「Aren't you supposed to come today?! Why didn't you contact us?」

"Are you my mother?"

「I'm your sister~!」

"I know that. Ah, also, I won't be able to come down, so tell mum and dad."

「Why?! No! You have to come down! My holiday plans will be destroyed!」

"No, there's something that's hard to explain. Sorry."

He couldn't possibly say that he couldn't go because he was busy looking after Mashiro.

「It's a girl.」

She was unexpectedly smart. Was it something called women's intuition?

"No."

「Brother, your voice just shook.」

"What you do mean it shook."

「I can tell straight way.」

“But there really isn’t anything.”

「You got a girlfriend? So you’re not coming back because you want to do… do... e... e ecchi things with her! I’m right! There’s no doubt about it! You pervert!」

“No! What kind of imagination… no, perverted thoughts do you have. I’m seriously worried about your future. When did you learn about these things?”

「Then you can come back down.…」

When Yuuko quietly said it, he had to pause.

“Actually, I picked up some cats.”

「Cats?」

“Yeah, so I need to look after them.”

「Then bring them! I want to pat them as well.」

“Sorry, there are seven of them.”

「Liar 」

“I’m not lying!”

「To pick up seven cats, that’s too strange! You’re cursed! How did you pick up so much cats within a few months?」

“If you put it that way, it might not be believable, but trust me.”

「Proof.」

“What?”

「Send some pictures of the cats.」

“Did you buy a phone?”

「No…. Dad is still against it. It’s worrisome, it’s dangerous, it’s not safe, you don’t

know what might happen, it's a shortcut to becoming a juvenile delinquent… why don't you say something to him. If I get a phone, I would always send messages with you.」

"Aren't you the loved one?"

「Don't change the topic~! Show some proof!」

"Then I'll send some pictures to mum's phone."

「Now!」

"I'm on the phone with you right now."

「You can hang up then.」

Yuuko didn't even wait for Sorata's answer and really hung up the phone. So he had to send a picture of the cats to his mum's phone as a MMS.

It was a harmonious picture with all of the cats bunched up together.

After a while, the call from his house came again.

"Hello."

「Brother, you're really cursed….」

"It used to be just one, but somehow, it ended up like this."

「That's really like you.….」

Yuuko's voice had a fair bit of dissatisfaction mixed in it. It seemed like she still couldn't accept that Sorata won't be visiting them.

"Anyways, how are things over there? Is mum doing ok?"

「Yeah, she's doing well. Same with dad.」

"No, I didn't ask about dad, and I don't want to know either."

「Aren't you going to ask about me?」

“Well, did you get taller?”

「I.. I don’t know. Geez, why are you asking such a thing?」

“Well, I haven’t seen you since the new years. You did get taller right?”

「Ev.. even if it is you brother, I... I can’t tell you. I... I did get a lit~tle bit taller…… but it was only a little bit……」

“How much in cms?”

「Huh?! You, you’re asking me in such detail?! Ah, uh… 5, 5……」

“What?! 5cm? You’re growing quite fast.”

「It’s only 5mm.…」

“What, is it only that.”

「Don’t be so disappointed… you, you idiot!」

“Does being small bother you?”

「Of course it does! Geez! You’re asking too much!」

He felt that there was a slight misunderstanding.

“You’re a girl, so being small…”

Then Sorata suddenly realised.

“Just to let you know, I’m talking about height, not…”

「Mum~, bother is talking about perverted things~!」

“Whoaa!! Wait, stop, Yuuko! Wait! Please! If you say those kinds of things, she’ll hold a family meeting!”

But only silence came out from the speaker on the phone. He could pick up some small talking sound and a sound of a plate breaking could be heard.

“So~, Yuuko-san”

「Brother, dad wants me to pass on a message.」

“Wha.. what is it…? Was dad home? What about work?”

「「I’m not giving you my daughter! You’re disowned!」. But what does disowned mean? Brother, are you crying?」

“… I want to cry. Ha…”

「What’s wrong brother? You’re sounding like a person with rotten eyes.」

He wanted to ask what kind of a voice that was, but Sorata didn’t have the energy to even ask.

“A... anyways, I won’t be able to go. I won’t be able to go anyways for various reasons, so you live happily with mum and dad.”

「Ye.. yeah…. Cheer up, I’m always on your side.」

“I’m hanging up now.”

「Yeah, I’ll call again soon.」

He placed his phone on the desk after hanging up. He hoped that the disowning bit was just a joke. Yeah. It was a joke for sure. Think about it, it was not a stranger but his father. When he was placed in Fukuoka, he said that he’ll be fine with or without Sorata. He said it clearly. But he also said he couldn’t live without Yuuko.

“Huh? Then is it really over?”

No, let’s not think about it. There was no way he was disowned. It must’ve been the difference in views. It was just like his dad to…. It really was over.

“Ha~.”

He collapsed on to his desk.

He opened phone to see if Ryuunosuke replied. However, there were no replies. He didn’t need to ask about programming urgently, so he decided to ask him later.

Sorata emptied his mind, and listened to his breathing.

The sound of the wind. The sound of the students doing club activities. And the sounds of footsteps coming towards him. The pace was short, but clear.

The sound of the footsteps stopped in front of the class.

“Kanda?”

When he looked up, he saw someone he knew well at the door.

It was Aoyama Nanami, a classmate.

“What are you up to?”

Her tied back hair swayed slightly.

“Following Shiina’s retests.”

“I don’t get it.”

He thought that she might not understand, so without explaining, he asked in return. If he explained about Mashiro, it would drag on and he there was no point in telling her.

“Why are you here then?”

“Nothing really.”

Nanami answered ambiguously, came into the classroom and sat in on a chair a seat next to him. She looked straight at the blackboard and was deep in thought.

“Did you get called out?”

But Nanami was a model student with good grades and attitude to match it. She never came late or was absent, so she was well liked by the teachers. It surprised Sorata to see someone like her, who wasn’t involved in any club activities, at school during the school holidays.

“It’s a bit complicated.”

Nanami who had her eyes focused on the blackboard said something unexpected. On her face, she didn’t have her usual expression, but actually had an even more confident face.

Sorata could feel Nanami's sight on him, wanting to share her feelings with him. Sorata noticed and because of his personality, he couldn't ignore it.

Sorata asked Nanami the way she wanted him to.

"Hmm, if you're ok with me, tell me. It's unlikely that I would be much of a help though."

"That's fine. I'm not expecting anything anyway."

"Wow, how cruel."

Nanami looked satisfied seeing how Sorata acted and put on a smile. He wanted to rebel, but he thought that it might not be the best time to act a fool, so he kept his mouth shut.

Nanami looked even happier and smiled even further. She paused for a bit and started to talk.

"To tell the truth."

Suddenly there was a sound of someone's stomach rumbling.

"……"

"……"

Nanami looked around. Sorata pretended not to hear it.

"Actually, the teacher called me out."

Rumble.

"*… Cough*. Huh, that's weird. I wonder if there's something wrong with my throat."

"That's your future lifeline, so take proper care of yourself."

Nanami wanted to become a voice actress, and was attending an academy to train herself.

"I... I should."

Again, there was a stomach rumbling sound.

“Hey.”

It was almost impossible to ignore.

“No, that’s not it!”

Rumble.

“Ah~ what is this!”

“That’s my line! I tried to let it pass, but why is your stomach rumbling so much!”

“I’m not doing it because I want to! If you were going to ignore it, you could’ve done it longer!”

“Why are you saying that?”

“Don’t worry about it!”

Nanami quickly faced away from him.

Her face was bright red and she grumbled to herself. It was her own fault but she blamed it all on Sorata.

Sorata took out Mashiro’s baumkuchen and held it out to Nanami.

“It’s ok. I’m… on a diet.”

“You’re not chubby enough to lose weight though.”

“You haven’t even seen me.”

Nanami put her hands on her waist and pouted. But it seemed like she couldn’t resist and looked at the baumkuchen longingly.

“It’s ok, so eat it.”

“How much is it?”

“Don’t mind it.”

“Kanda is also a dorm student, so I can’t accept it without paying.”

He wanted to share some of Nanami’s manners with the members at Sakurasou.

“Then 100yen plus tax.”

Nanami took out her purse poured out its contents. Three coins came rolling out. Two 10yen coins and one 1yen coin. Total of 21yen.

“Was that a joke?”

“This is all I have. My phone got disconnected this month…”

“Really…?”

“Please don’t look at me with those pitiful eyes. On the weekend, money from my part time will come in, so it’s alright.”

“But for today and tomorrow, you only have 21yen…. Please eat this baumkuchen. I’m the one who’s actually in pain looking at you. Please eat it.”

Sorata over exaggerated his actions and clutched his chest, pretending to be hurt. No, his chest was actually hurting.

“If you say so… but I’ll pay you back when I get paid from my part time job. Don’t forget it.”

Answering half heartedly, he gave the baumkuchen to Nanami.

Nanami ripped open the wrapping and bit a large chunk of it, only to choke on it.

“Eat slowly!”

He tapped her back, but she didn’t stop coughing. Sorata ran out to the corridor, and bought some tea from the vending machine next to the stairway. He poked a straw through it and handed it over to Nanami.

“Ha…. I thought I was going to die. Thanks…”

“I don’t want to be tried as a murderer, so be careful. 「Baumkuchen murder case, the perpetrator only stood and watched.」”

“I don’t want that either.”

Nanami stared him down.

“But it couldn’t be helped. I had nothing to eat since yesterday’s lunch.”

“What? But even if you have no money, the dorm should provide you with the meals. The breakfast and dinner is included in the dorm fees.”

“I told you I have no money.”

“But you have 21yen.”

Nanami glared at him coldly.

“Just now, I could feel that you’re making fun of me.”

“A... anyways what happened?”

“My payments for the dorms are a bit late.”

“A bit?”

“Around 3 months worth…”

“Is that a bit? I’m not sure what to think of your standards of being a bit anymore.”

“So the meals have stopped.”

“Heh~, just like the gas and the water.”

“I got called out because of that. If I don’t pay it by this month, they would have an interview with my parents.”

“And your parents would.”

“Yep. They are against me living by myself. Mainly about me becoming a voice actress as well. I would work for my personal expenses. I wouldn’t cause any inconvenience to other people. I wouldn’t rely on the family. With these conditions, I got accepted into the school and if the school calls home because of the dorm fees, it would be a big problem. I would be dragged back to Osaka for sure.”

“I see.”

Nanami summed it up as “It’s a bit complicated.” But the situation seemed direr than how she described it.

“I already payed half of the lesson fee for the academy, so if I work hard during the summer holidays, I would be ok from then. I found an extra part time job as well.”

“But you have to pay for the summer break’s worth of dorm payments.”

“Yeah, so I’m thinking about it.”

Nanami sighed deeply. But Nanami who kept a straight posture while sitting on the chair didn’t look like a person who was in trouble.

That must’ve been the reason.

Sorata half jokingly said this to her.

“Then why don’t you move into Sakurasou?”

Nanami’s shoulders jerked up for a moment. She slowly turned her head to look at Sorata.

“Sakurasou?”

“It’s pretty old, but the dorm fee is cheap. The meals are prepared and paid separately, so you have full control over it. I have to pay for the cat feed, but I’m actually paying less than I was. There’s an empty room for a girl anyway.”

“Hm~, I see.”

Nanami rubbed her bottom lips with her finger. She was deep in thought.

“But Sakurasou is no good.”

“Well, I guess it is different to your usual image. And the way that the other students view you is hard to deal with…. Sometimes, it feels like the teachers are against you as well…. It really is no good.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

Nanami looked unhappy, as if she was hurt at what Sorata had said. But Sorata couldn't figure out the reason. All he knew was that she would get even unhappier if he asked for the reason, and that she looked at him with a scary face when he didn't ask.

"Then what did you mean?"

"There are guys there."

Nanami bowed her head down and peeked at Sorata.

"Well, Jin-senpai is certainly dangerous."

To the king of sleepovers, he currently had six different lovers. All of them being women older than him, he had a schedule set up and slept over depending on the day. Sometimes, he wouldn't even come back home for a week.

"No, it's because you're there."

"Aoyama… what do you think of me."

"A man, a male, a wolf."

"I'm not a wolf! It's not like I would act any different just because you're at Sakurasou. I wouldn't even care about it!"

At this one sentence, Nanami's mood changed rapidly.

"Does that mean that I have no charm?"

Her eyes that reflected her strong will before were now shaking. She turned her head away in a worried manner. But she continued to look at Sorata.

"N.. no, it's not like I meant that I don't find you attractive as an opposite gender."

"Then what?"

Her voice full of expectation stopped Sorata's train of thought, and only left compassion in his heart. All he could do was just open and close his mouth like a goldfish.

“What do you think about me?”

Nanami urged him on, and Sorata could only say,

“You are! You are attractive! Before, was just uh, embarrassment or something, I was just shy. If you actually come to Sakurasou, I might get nose bleeds every day and die of blood loss!”

Nanami who’d been observing Sorata carefully hugged herself and started to laugh uncontrollably.

“Uh~, Aoyama-san? Did you trick me or something?”

Nanami got up and wiped away her tears in her eyes from all the laughing.

“You’re so simple.”

“You…”

“You better be more careful, women are cunning you know.”

“Especially you Aoyama… since you’re good at acting as well.”

“Thanks, that’s the best compliment for me.”

After Nanami said it, she turned around as if she noticed something. She was looking to the top of Sorata, no she was looking behind him.

When Sorata turned around, he saw Mashiro at the doorway.

Mashiro looked at Sorata, glanced at Nanami and looked back to Sorata.

“Is your tests finished? That was quick.”

Reaching Sorata, Mashiro placed her answer sheets on the desk.

Sorata picked them up and checked each of them. Five pages in total. That was all that she had to sit today.

100 marks. It was a five 100 marks streak.

“You can compliment me.”

“Why should I! You cheater!”

“There’s no need to be shy.”

“I’m not being shy! This is all because of your convenient skill. Apologize to all the students who actually study hard.”

“Sorry.”

“Put some feelings into it!”

“Sorry?”

“Why did it turn into a question!”

“Uh, Kanda?”

Trying to find herself in the conversation, Nanami spoke to him.

“Ah, sorry. My body reacted by itself.”

“That’s.. not good isn’t it?”

Mashiro tugged at Sorata’s sleeves.

“Huh? Ah, she’s my classmate Nanami Aoyama.”

When Sorata introduced Nanami, Mashiro had an unexpected reaction.

“The voice from Misaki’s anime.”

“Well, she is, but how did you know?”

“I heard Misaki say it before.”

“But it’s quite strange for you to recognise the name.”

“Because it was a pretty name.”

When Mashiro said it with a serious face, Nanami was taken back and could only answer like this.

“Th.. thanks.”

“You probably know who this is, but she’s Mashiro Shiina, she lives in Sakurasou like me.”

“Yeah I know. She’s famous.”

Mashiro had a lot of attention from the whole school because of being called a genius painter. There probably wasn’t a student in the whole school who didn’t hear about Mashiro’s name.

Even when her name was mentioned, Mashiro kept an emotionless face and stood next to Sorata.

“Sorata.”

She called out his name as usual.

“Calling each other by first names…?”

Nanami muttered softly, but it didn’t reach Sorata’s ears.

Before Mashiro could say anything else, Sorata took out a baumkuchen and handed it over.

“That’s the only one left, so saviour it.”

Her pale and slender fingers gripped the package.

But Mashiro didn’t try to eat it, but looked towards Sorata.

“I want to eat the deluxe melon bread from Hashimoto Bakery.”

“Why do you only remember useless things…”

“You don’t have any?”

“Don’t complain and just eat what you have.”

Mashiro wordlessly nodded her head and started to eat the baumkuchen after taking it out of its package.

It felt like feeding an animal.

Nanami also looked surprised and looked at Mashiro.

Not even 3 seconds has passed when without a warning, Mashiro started to sleep while standing up.

“Don’t sleep!”

Sorata lightly smacked her head. Mashiro opened her eyes, and as if nothing had happened, she resumed eating the baumkuchen. But after 10 seconds, she started to sleep again.

“Don’t sleep I said!”

This time, he poked her forehead. Like before, she simply opened her eyes and resumed munching on the baumkuchen.

“Shiina is quite a unique person. I felt it for while now though…”

Nanami chose her words carefully and expressed her thoughts.

“This is nothing.”

“Really?”

While Sorata and Nanami had the short conversation, Mashiro was already gone to dream land for the third time.

“Give it a rest!”

Thinking that this would be the last time, Sorata hit Mashiro on top of her head.

“I’m sleepy.”

“Think about the place and the time.”

“It’s because you didn’t let me sleep last night.”

“Huh?”

“What?!”

Sorata's question and Nanami's surprised came out at the same time.

Nanami looked at Sorata with accusing eyes straight away.

"It's not true at all."

"Sorata wasn't good at all, but you chose to continue."

"You shut up for a while!"

"You're the one who should shut up Kanda!"

For some reason, Sorata got told off.

Nanami's face was bright red, and she was misunderstanding for sure.

"Since we done it till the morning, my body is sore."

"Ka.. Kanda. You!"

"No! That's not it! It's not what you're thinking! It's a game! We were playing a game last night until this morning! It's true! Believe me!"

"Really? Shiina?"

At the important moment, Mashiro fell asleep again.

"Wake up! Shiina! If you don't, I'll die!"

Mashiro opened her eyes and glared at Sorata like a cat that'd just lost its home.

"We played some games. Right Shiina?"

"Yeah."

"Bu.. but you were playing all night in the room together right? If it continues, it might turn into those types of situation!"

"That's ok. Jin-senpai and Misaki-senpai were with us as well."

Looking at Sorata who was working hard to resolve the misunderstanding, Mashiro must've been tired standing up on her feet, because she leaned on Sorata, while taking

up half of the chair that he'd been sitting on. She started to sleep peacefully.

Mashiro's soft skin and warmness could be felt on the surfaces their skins were touching.

Because of Mashiro's natural action, Sorata missed his change to clear up the misunderstanding with Nanami.

In Nanami's perspective, Mashiro and Sorata's actions must've looked so natural. No, that was what was written on Nanami's frozen face.

"Wha.. what's wrong, Aoyama."

He knew what her reaction would be. All he had to do was to wait for her to say it.

"Are you two going out?"

As she asked, Nanami's words were pronounced clearly. But for Sorata, whose hand was slightly shaking, he didn't have the leisure to take note of it.

"Wh.. why do you think so?"

"Should I say it's the distance, like… even now…"

Sorata quickly shook Mashiro to wake her up, and gave the seat to her. However, Mashiro's warmth remained and shook Sorata's heart.

"If you're not, what kind of a relation do you have?"

"Just dorm mates."

Sorata signalled to Mashiro so that she doesn't say anything unnecessary just in case. Mashiro's head slightly nodded. Their eye contact was successful.

As soon as Sorata thought that he was safe, Mashiro spoke to Nanami with a serious face.

"Sorata is my master."

Sorata felt a blizzard from the South Pole blowing into the steaming class room.

The atmosphere froze.

Nanami had an expressionless face and just blinked her eyes wordlessly.

“Shiina! Why do you always say the unnecessary things at the wrong time!”

“Ma.. master…”

Nanami’s shoulders started to shake. Her clenched fist was shaking even more. She quickly faced towards Sorata.

Her sharp eyes stared at him and his excuse wasn’t able to escape from his mouth.

“Ka.. Kanda! You ain’t allowed to do that![16]”

Nanami sprang up and started to lecture Sorata.

“Heh~ a dialect.”

“It might be different if you guys were a couple… but a master, whatcha think ya doing?! A high schooler shouldn’t be doin' that stuff.”

At her own passionate speech, Nanami quickly blushed. What did she think when Mashiro said master? All Sorata knew was that what she had thought was something that involved Sorata and Mashiro in an impossible situation.

“I’ll tell you know Aoyama, but it’s a misunderstanding! A big one at that!”

“Scrap your excuses!”

With her eyes slightly teary, Nanami continued to stare at Sorata.

“No, I’m telling you it’s a misunderstanding.”

“What are you saying. Aren’t cha crazy? A.. a master… master… are ya out of your mind?”

“Ah~! What should I do to make you believe me?”

“I’ve got a good idea…”

Nanami’s eyes light up and he had a feeling that it wasn’t going to be something good.

“Wha.. what is it?”

He had a really bad feeling about it.

“I’ll…”

Before speaking any further, she took some deep breaths, faced Sorata and spoke with a strong voice.

“I’ll move into Sakurasou and confirm it myself!”

Sorata’s face froze and Mashiro thoughtlessly fell asleep.

It was definitely Sorata who suggested her to come to Sakurasou. But that was to suggest the dorm for her to live in, not to inspect Sorata’s everyday life.

“It’s not good to rush things Aoyama! Value yourself higher.”

If she came to inspect Sorata and Mashiro’s relation, it would be quite troublesome. Because no matter how one looks at it, it was definitely not normal.

As if she was enjoying Sorata’s state of panic, Nanami put on her usual relaxed face.

“Please take care of me, Kanda.”

That night, during the emergency Sakurasou meeting, the report of the new tenant Nanami Aoyama moving was mentioned by Chihiro. Apparently the school gladly let her move without an argument, it must’ve been because of the delayed dorm fees.

The date of her arrival was set for the first of August. And since Nanami didn’t have money to call in the movers, it was decided that the tenants of Sakurasou would help her move in was also decided.

22nd of July.

The record of Sakurasou’s meeting was like this.

-- The 2nd year Nanami Aoyama will move into room 203. The welcoming party will take place on the day she moves in. The one who invited her in the first place, Sorata, has no right to complain. We’ll enjoy it to the fullest. I think someone might not be able to hold it back until the 1st of August, so please prepare your hearts. Secretary-Jin Mitaka.

-- Misaki senpai, please don’t do anything useless! Added by- Sorata Kanda.

-- In this world, there is nothing that is useless! Added by- Misaki Kamiigusa.

Chapter 2 - The Tempest

Part 1

“Here, the deluxe melon bread from Hashimoto.”

When Mashiro’s second day of retest was done, without getting changed, Sorata lead her to the kitchen table. Before Mashiro’s eyes, he placed the bag from the bakery on the kitchen table.

Like the day before, Sorata had to go bring Mashiro to school and back. So while Mashiro was sitting her test, he ran to the markets and got in line to buy the melon bread.

He didn’t buy it because of the punishment game for losing. It was something that he thought of after long hours of consideration; to use it as a bait to get Mashiro to promise him something.

Mashiro looked at the bag that contained the melon bread with great interest, and soundlessly reached out for it. Before her hand could make a contact with the bag, Sorata quickly moved the deluxe melon bread. Mashiro’s hand cut into the empty space, glanced at Sorata with a complaining face, and set her eyes back onto the bakery bag.

“You’re not giving it to me?”

“Don’t talk to the bag.”

With a slightly frowning face, Mashiro finally looked at Sorata.

“I see, you’re trying to bait her with the bread.”

Jin, who was already in the kitchen having some cold udon for his late lunch, smirked while looking at the two of them. He was wearing a polo t-shirt with a pair of grey chino pants. He had his usual clean look even in the dorms.

Sorata didn’t want to be observed by others. He wanted to complain about it to Jin, but it would be troublesome to switch this conversation so he decided to ignore Jin.

“In exchange for this melon bread, I want you to promise me something.”

“I’ll do it.”

“I haven’t said what it was yet!”

“……”

“Listen carefully, in a week's time, Aoyama will move in here. To the room next to yours. You know about this right?”

Yes, Mashiro nodded her head.

“Now, think about this carefully. The one who wakes you up in the morning is me. The one who prepares your clothes is also me. The washing and cooking are also done by me…. Not only that, the one who washes, folds, and chooses your panties is also me!”

“The one who wears them is me.”

“You don’t need to add that! No matter how you think of it, it’s strange isn’t it? How would Aoyama think when she finds out this shocking truth.”

Sorata would be branded as a pervert, and be treated as trash. And rumours would spread not only to the school, but to the shopping area as well, making it impossible for him to walk around in daylight. Even thinking about it made Sorata depressed.

But for Mashiro, she didn’t even have a hundredth of Sorata’s sense of worries at all.

“I just want to eat the deluxe melon bread, I think.”

“That’s what you’re thinking right now!”

“That’s not it.”

“Heh, so what’s not it?”

“I really want to eat it.”

“… Senpai, what should I do?”

Sorata accepted his defeat and asked the spectator for some advice.

“What, weren’t you going to ignore me?”

Jin slurped at his udon and pointed at Sorata with his chopsticks that had a piece of leek stuck on it.

“I did think like that before. I apologize; I was an idiot for a few seconds.”

“If she suspects you of anything, why not just say that you guys are dating?”

“I was an idiot for asking.……”

“Listen till the end.”

Jin moved away from the table to clear up his dishes. He started to skilfully wash his dishes and continued to talk.

“Thinking about it logically, do you really think that Mashiro can wash the clothes, clean, and choose her own clothes?”

“Well, it’s not possible, but she has to try!”

“You should just accept the impossible. Realistically, you can only accept my suggestion. You waking her up every morning, taking her clothes off and on, washing them is normal for couples. Aoyama should be able to accept that much.”

As he was speaking, he had finished his dishes and came back to the table.

“Oh, I see! As expected of you senpai, you’re a genius! … As if I would say that!”

“Heh, for you to play along with me, it’s different from the usual you Sorata.”

“Senpai, have you ever worn boxers chosen by one of your lovers before?”

“I’m not that much of a pervert.”

“Don’t call me a pervert!”

If Jin thought of it that way, Nanami understanding them would be out of question.

“I’m not interested in underwear. What’s important is what’s beneath them.”

“I didn’t ask for that much!”

Sorata regretted asking someone like Jin and he looked towards Mashiro again.

“As I was saying.”

Who knows when Mashiro took out the note, because she was sketching on it. What’s even more surprising was that she was sketching the paper bag from the Hashimoto Bakery. Her will to eat has taken over her fingers as well. For no reason, the sketching was life like and really well done.

“Shiina, I’m begging you. Aoyama isn’t the type of a person to move into Sakurasou. If we continue to live as normal, she won’t be able to return to school.”

“That’s a big problem.”

“Then treat it as a big problem!”

“Really big problem.”

“That doesn’t make a difference!”

It was hopeless. It was impossible to ask Mashiro to feel the same way as him.

“If you don’t understand, then it can’t be helped, but at least do your washings and pick out your own clothes. Please! So from today, we’ll have training sessions, got it?”

“……”

“Hey, I said, got it?”

“If I eat the deluxe, I think I might know it.”

“If you’re going to shorten it, at least leave in the melon bread!”

Since he did prepare it for that reason, Sorata handed the deluxe melon bread over to Mashiro. Then Mashiro quickly took out the melon bread from the paper bag and started to nibble on the bread.

“Well, did you get all that?”

“Deluxe, got it.”

“… Yeah yeah.”

Sorata thought that it would be better if he waited for her to finish eating, so he got up from his seat and went to the fridge to get some cold drinks. Sorata poured out some oolong tea into a cup for Mashiro and himself and brought it back to the table.

When he did, he saw the stripped melon bread in front of his seat. Only the cookie bits had been eaten[17].

“Who taught you to eat like this!”

“I’ll give it to you.”

“Mottainai Obake[18] will snatch you away!”

While saying that, Sorata picked up the stripped melon bread and shoved it in his mouth. The deluxe melon bread was just a simple bread now. Well, it was certainly delicious though…… “I know what Sorata means though.”

“Heh~, then please tell me what you have understood.”

“So.”

“Yeah?”

“To protect our secret.”

“You don’t need to say it suspiciously.”

“We will.”

“Yeah.”

“Make Nanami disappear.”

“Were you really listening to me!”

Jin laughed out loudly.

“When did I discuss about an assassination plan!”

“Just now.”

“I didn’t! I didn’t!”

Then Mashiro tilted her head in an unknowing manner.

“The strange one is you! Why are you thinking that it’s unexpected?!”

“You didn’t?”

“Of course I didn’t! Before you can worry about others, do something about yourself first!”

“What are you saying, Sorata?”

“I should be asking that question! You’re trying to assassinate someone before you can take care of yourself? Young people these days! Try to think more about other people!”

Completely ignoring Sorata, Mashiro moved at her own laid back pace, and slowly drank the oolong tea in the cup. She looked like she didn’t care about Sorata at all, now that she had eaten the melon bread.

“I’m telling you, just say that you’re dating.”

After hearing that from Jin repeatedly, it did feel like a good idea.

Before his decision would sway, Sorata desperately tried to get a strong grip on his will.

“Listen carefully Shiina. For a week from today, we’re going train you. That’s Plan A. If that doesn’t work, we’ll have to review senpai’s Plan B.”

It looked like she couldn’t understand, because Mashiro wordlessly looked at Sorata.

“So making her disappear is Plan C.”

“That’s rejected!”

At that timing, the door bell ring.

When Jin signalled to him with his eyes, Sorata got up. He wanted to regather his thoughts, so a visitor was a good change of pace.

“Yes, who is it?”

He asked while opening the door and saw Nanami Aoyama standing there with a discomforted face.

“Whoaa!”

“Why are you so surprised?”

It was because he was planning on what he should do with Nanami just now, but he just mumbled over it saying that it was nothing. However, his suspicious face remained……

“Why are you here?”

“Has my stuff arrived here yet?”

“What?”

“I went to school to talk about the switching of dorms…”

So that was why she was in her school uniform.

“But when I came back, all my belongings were gone.”

“What? Did someone use a teleportation magic?”

“Don’t joke around like that.”

Nanami looked at him with cold eyes.

“I’m kidding. Sorry. I thought of a certain person’s face, and said it without thinking.”

That certain person was no other than the alien who has settled into Sakurasou.

Nanami being here must mean that she had thought the same thing.

“Can I come in?”

“Of course.”

Sorata lead Nanami to the 2nd floor. Without hesitation, he went to the end of the hall

where room 203 was.

On the door, there was a plate that said Nanamin's room. Looking at the plate, it was almost impossible to deny where her belongings were.

Nanami sighed in renunciation.

"… Aoyama, are you alright?"

"Yeah."

Nanami calmly answered.

"Something doesn't feel right, and it's a bit chilling."

"I was quite surprised when my stuff disappeared. Also, on my way here, I thought about this and that, and decided that coming here was my best bet. I just needed to prepare my heart."

"… I see. So what are you going to do?"

When he asked, Nanami's eyes were looking at the doorknob, telling Sorata to open the door open.

Sorata prepared himself and opened the door to room 203.

First thing that he saw was the large window. A breeze came in and the sky blue curtain fluttered.

The room had the same structure as Sorata's room, but because of the lack of electronic items, the room looked bigger than his. There was just a bed, a closet, a desk and a chair.

She probably liked objects made out of glass, because there were a few animal shaped decorations on the desk. Looking at them carefully, they were all shaped like tigers.

Nanami wordlessly walked in and checked each of her stuff, and when she was done, she nodded to Sorata who was standing at the doorway.

Sorata said sorry for intruding as he walked into the room towards the bed. Sleeping

on the bed were the origin of all evil, Misaki, hugging a tiger shaped cushion with a peaceful face and Sorata's seven cats.

Noticing something, the white cat Hikari looked up. It cried out meow looking at Sorata and Nanami. It leapt off the bed and rubbed at Nanami's legs. It probably remembered Nanami clearly.

When Sorata first picked up Hikari, Nanami was also with him. Before he moved into Sakurasou, they often fed it together.

That was when Sorata was able to befriend Nanami as well.

Nanami patted Hikari's head.

"You've grown quite big."

Hikari cried out in a happy manner.

Hearing the cat's cry, Misaki's ears flickered and the queen of cats that had been napping on the bed let out a loud cry as she woke up.

"Unya~!"

She yawned and stretched out her arms. The surprised cats all got up at the same moment. All seven of the cats, Hikari included, must've sensed Nanami's bad mood, they all quickly ran away leaving their owner Sorata behind.

If possible, Sorata wanted to run away as well.

But he couldn't run away without taking control over the situation. Nanami's body was shaking while she was staring at Misaki.

"I need to get changed and go to my work, so could you please get out?"

Nanami's voice was unexpectedly calm.

"But Kohai-kun."

"Kamiigusa-senpai as well."

"Eh~, what's the matter. We're both girls, so let's get along~."

“I refuse. There is a limit to being abnormal. How is it normal for someone to move other people’s belongings?”

Nanami poured out her merciless words.

“Yeah Aoyama. You tell her.”

The one who was the biggest victim was Nanami, but the damage dealt to Sorata was quite large as well. He was now unable to carry out Plan A because he didn’t have any more time to train Mashiro. He had to think of a different method as soon as possible.

“In life, you need the appropriate dosage of surprise! If you don’t, your body will dry up! No surprise, no life!”

“There is always a limit to everything. This is unbelievable.”

“Right right? It’s unbelievably funny right? I thought of it after hearing that you were going to move in! It was quite hard getting the Sainomaku Moving Centre was difficult~. They said something about not being able to move the stuff that I didn’t understand, so I told them that it was to save someone’s life and it took over 3 hours to explain on the phone. But seeing Nanamin this happy is a big success.”

Misaki, whose eyes were sparkling, didn’t have any remorse.

The reason why Sorata didn’t notice this was because he left the house early this morning to take Mashiro to the school. He thought to himself if only he remained in Sakurasou, and if only Mashiro didn’t have the retests. Well, even if he didn’t leave, he didn’t think that he would be able to stop Misaki’s plans.

“How unfortunate, time to go with Plan B?”

He looked around and saw Jin poking his head out in the door way. He looked at Sorata and gently smiled. By looking at him, he realised that Jin knew about the stuff being moved in.

Behind Jin, he could see Mashiro as well.

“Mitaka-senpai… and Shiina as well…”

Nanami looked around at everyone and bowed her head.

“I’m Nanami Aoyama, a second year in the normal curriculum. I was actually planning to move in on the first of August, but it looks like I’ll be living here from now on. Please take care of me.”

“I wanted to live with Nanamin as soon as possible~.”

Misaki answered first.

“Well, we’ll get along.”

Jin followed suit, and Mashiro just nodded her head.

“Let’s get along.”

Sorata was the last one to answer.

“But what was this Plan B?”

When Nanami who had a good sense of hearing asked Jin, Sorata begged Jin not to say anything necessary with eye signals.

“For more details, ask Sorata.”

He gave out the worst answer.

He just enjoyed watching others in trouble.

Sorata pretended not to notice Nanami giving him the daggers and ignored her.

“Hmm, it doesn’t really matter though…. Anyways, I need to go to my part time job, so could you all get out? Also, the 2nd floor is forbidden for boys.”

Nanami curtly answered.

“I don’t know what it was like before, but now that I have moved in, I hope you stick to that you.”

When Nanami looked at everyone in an accusing way, Jin raised both of his hands in a surrendering pose. Now it was almost impossible to look after Mashiro. What should he do.

While everyone’s attention was focused somewhere else, Misaki who was going

through the closet suddenly let out a loud fanfare. She was holding pieces of white cloths in her hand.

“Look at this Kohai-kun! Nanami wears these sexy things!”

The things that Misaki pushed into his face were white panties with laces on it. It was so thin, that the other side was almost visible. No, it was visible, because he was able to see Misaki’s face through it.

“Misaki-senpai, you’re quite brave.”

It was shocking to see how she was able to naturally go through other people’s closets and drawers.

“Ah? That’s not… how did it…”

Nanami wasn’t able to understand what was going on, and she just blinked in surprise.

“It’s those who are well mannered and diligent that has a hidden side to them.”

Jin curtly analysed.

“Pl.. please give it back!”

Nanami who recovered from her shock quickly reached out and stole the panties off Misaki. She put it back to the closet and then glared at Sorata straight away.

“Th.. that was something that was given to me for my birthday present as a joke from one of my friends, I wasn’t the one who bought it. A.. and I’ve never worn them before.”

“Then show me when you do wear it for the first time.”

Jin coolly joked.

Nanami’s face was quickly blushed bright red.

“I’ll never wear them! You.. you know that right Kanda?”

“I haven’t said anything yet…”

“Yeah that’s right. Sorata is already used to seeing panties.”

“What?”

“Senpai, please don’t say useless things!”

“Well, you’re gonna get caught soon anyway.”

Jin glanced at Mashiro. Nanami wasn’t the type of a person who would miss that. And of course, Sorata noticed the small change of expression on Nanami’s face as well. He prepared himself for what was about to come.

But it was Misaki who spoke out before Nanami.

“Hey guys~ hey guys~, there’s some more here!”

It was white panties as well. It was the type where you have to tie the strings on both sides.

“Ah, I like those better. It’s easier to take off.”

Jin purposely gave his own opinion.

“Senpai, if you were in a foreign RPG game, you would’ve been shot dead.”

He felt sorry for Nanami.

“Please don’t go through my stuff! Th.. that’s also something that my friend chose for me, it’s not like I chose it for myself!”

As if she was snatching a prey, Nanami swiftly snatched the panties away.

“Why.. why are you guys like this!”

“Now, now. Why don’t Misaki-senpai and Jin-senpai get out? At this rate, Aoyama’s mind will be broken.”

Jin muttered to himself saying well well as he went out of the room. Mashiro wordlessly followed suit.

“You too, Kanda!”

“Huh? I’m getting the same treatment?”

“You’re just a beast…”

Nanami muttered to herself.

“Don’t talk to yourself.”

Then Nanami took a deep breath.

“Beast!”

“I didn’t mean that you should say it clearly!”

“Ah~ really~ what do you want me to do! Anyway, let me be alone!”

Misaki was dragged out by Jin who came back.

“You get out as well!”

“Aoyama.”

“What?”

“Are you regretting it?”

“I am. But there’s no point thinking about it now. It was me how couldn’t pay for the dorm fees in the first place. Now is not the time to be picky about it.”

It really was something that Nanami would say.

“It might also be a good opportunity for me.”

Nanami said with a smaller voice and glanced at Sorata.

“Ye.. yeah. I’m not sure what it might be, but do your best.”

“Yep, I don’t want to hear that from you, but I know that it would be difficult if I don’t give it my best.”

Nanami hunched her shoulders in a tired manner. Her eyes were on the doorway that Mashiro already walked out of.

“Aoyama, I just want to let you know in advance.”

“What is it?”

“It’s not like Misaki-senpai has any ill feeling about it, she really wants to welcome you. So please know that.”

“Are you welcoming me as well?”

“Of course.”

It would’ve been better if she moved in after he was able to train Mashiro, but was welcoming his friend.

“I’ve been waiting for a long time. You could even say that I’ve been waiting for all my life.”

“Me? Wha.. what does that mean?”

“You should know without me having to tell you.”

“If you don’t say it, I wouldn’t know… about that…”

Nanami looked at Sorata with great expectation. She waited for him to say something. Because that, Sorata was unable to back out. He decided to speak out his honest thoughts.

“I’ve always thought of you as a good person.”

“Re.. really?”

“Yeah. I really wanted you to move in so that you can tell others off in Sakurasou.”

Nanami’s face froze and she lowered her head, shaking furiously.

But Sorata didn’t notice it.

“I hope you die getting hit by a meteorite.”

Nanami said quietly.

“What?”

“Never mind, so get out!”

Getting hit by the tiger shaped cushion that Nanami threw, Sorata ran out of the room in a hurry.

Mashiro, Jin and Misaki remained in the hallway.

“We’re going to get hated from the day one. Since she’s going to her part time job, should we have the welcoming party some other time?”

“Ehh~, I wanted to get along well with Nanamin~.”

“Whose fault do you think this is!”

“It’s all Kohai-kun’s fault!”

“I can agree with that.”

“Me too.”

Mashiro also agreed quickly.

“Shiina, even you as well!”

“Kanda! Don’t be so noisy in front of the room!”

When Nanami’s voice rang out, Jin and Misaki had a triumphant face. Mashiro looked at him with a pitiful gaze.

“Did… I do something wrong?”

“I think it’s because of you not being aware.”

Unfortunately, Sorata couldn’t understand what Jin had said.

“Sorata, there’s always Plan C.”

“Rejected!”

Part 2

Anyways, it was quite problematic.

How should he explain about Mashiro to Nanami.

That was the only thing on Sorata's mind from the time he opened his eyes in the morning. Even now, as he was cleaning the bathroom, he was working his brain to its limits trying to think of a solution.

It was actually Mashiro's turn to clean the bathroom this week, but if he asked her to do it and she made a big mess of it, Sorata would have to clean it up anyway, so he's been doing everything himself.

He used the shower head to clear away the foam from the cleaning products.

Nanami moved in pretty suddenly yesterday and returned from her part time job well past 10 last night, so she might not have noticed the unusual things about Sakurasou.

However, she might notice it by today or tomorrow. He had to do something about it.

To say that he was actually dating Mashiro and ask Nanami just to ignore them was Jin's suggestion.

But the act coming from Sorata, who had 16 years of experience being a single, it would be found out quickly.

What on earth should he say to Nanami.

-- I'm going out with Mashiro so don't disturb us.

Wait wait, I'm not that well off. That's a completely different person.

-- Actually, I'm going out with Mashiro. Please treat us kindly.

It felt like as if he was talking to a senior that they both knew.

-- The reason for my visit is to get permission to date Mashiro.

It felt like as if he was talking to a parent.

Clearly, all of them were impossible. Even if they lied about it, they would have to keep up the act everyday just to fool Nanami. Hell would suit him better.

If she asked them to kiss as a proof, it would be all over.

After washing away all the foam, Sorata turned off the shower. He lifted the calico cat Kodama who was near his feet up to his face.

Kodama quietly cried in an unsatisfied manner for being lifted up high so suddenly.

“What do you think I should do?”

“It probably doesn’t know the answer.”

When he looked to the source of the voice, he saw Nanami looking at him in a pitiful way. She was neatly dressed in a white blouse and a denim kyurot pants[19]. Even though they were both girls, Misaki dressed roughly in the dorm and Mashiro was usually in her pyjamas.

When he let Kodama down, Kodama ran out of the bathroom.

“What are you doing Kanda?”

“What does it look like I’m doing?”

“Worrying about your life while cleaning the bathroom?”

“Correct!”

“But according to the roster on the fridge, Shiina is rostered this week.”

“Ah~, that’s.”

“Where’s Shiina?”

Seeing Sorata hesitate, Nanami coolly continued talking.

“She’s probably sleeping.”

“That’s not good.”

Nanami turned to the right and without batting an eye, she walked to the 2nd floor.

“Whoa, wait Aoyama!”

Sorata hurriedly followed her.

The room that is first seen when you go upstairs is Misaki’s room 201. Mashiro’s room, room 202 was placed in the middle. Nanami knocked the door.

“Shiina?”

“Aoyama, it’s alright.”

“You need to follow the set rules.”

Hearing such an obvious thing, he felt like a bad person.

“No, it’s really ok!”

“Hmm, so you’re trying to cover for Shiina.”

“I’m not covering for her! But it’s better not to look into this room, I’m saying this for your sake. It’s not a normal world, so take my advice.”

“See, you’re covering for her.”

“I told you I’m not! And talking through the door like this won’t wake her up.”

“Then how do you wake her up?”

By pure reflex, Sorata looked at the doorknob. Nanami should’ve known what he meant, but she couldn’t hide her surprise.

“But the key…”

As Nanami said that, she twisted the doorknob. And when it opened, she opened her eyes widely.

“I can’t believe she doesn’t lock the door when there are males here…”

What lay behind the door was even more unbelievable.

Nanami who had just been swept up into this strange world froze with her mouth wide open.

As usual, Mashiro's room was littered with clothes, underwear, books, mangas, names[20] and manuscripts, making it hard to walk in without stepping on anything.

"What is all this."

"I said the same thing in April…"

Nanami carefully walked towards the bed. But when she noticed that Mashiro wasn't there, she looked around to Sorata with a puzzled face.

"Under the desk."

With a suspicious face, Nanami peeked under the table.

"Oh my god…"

"I don't think you knew, but Shiina is someone from a different world."

"Is that why she came to Sakurasou?"

Sorata nodded his head enthusiastically.

"Shiina, wake up."

Nanami squatted down and shook Mashiro's shoulders.

Mashiro squirmed and woke up.

Sorata looked away just in case, and prepared himself, but today was safe. She was wearing her pyjamas on top and bottom.

"Morning Shiina."

"……"

With a half awake expression, Mashiro reached out to Nanami's body and started to feel her up.

"Kyaa, wha.. what?!"

“Sorata… you became soft?”

“Sorata’s over there!”

Then she walked to the direction Nanami pointed at and came up to Sorata. This time, she reached out to Sorata and in the same manner, she checked him with her own fingers.

“What are you doing?”

“Real one. This one is Sorata.”

“Check with your eyes!”

“I’m sleepy. I don’t want to open my eyes.”

Looking at her condition, it looked like she slept at dawn.

“Were you working on your names?”

“Debut manuscript, final edits before submission.”

Answering briskly, Mashiro crawled back to her nest under the desk. Shortly after, her regular breathing sounds could be heard.

Nanami who watched this from the start to the finish, literally wrapped her hands around her head.

“Sorry, give me some time to understand all this.”

“I’ll tell you now as a first hand witness, the harder you try to understand her, more troubled you will be.”

Mashiro’s special attack will deal more mental damage to an ordinary person. In Nanami’s case, it looked like it dealt more damage than it did to Sorata.

“… I guess so. Yeah, I should give up. More than that, Shiina, wake up!”

The brave challenger Nanami charged at Mashiro once more. It would be better if she gave up. But even if he said that, Nanami wouldn’t stop anyway.

Once more, Mashiro crawled out from beneath the desk.

Wrapped around in clothes and underwear, she sat down on the floor and looked up at Nanami.

“Shiina, get changed. You’re too defenceless in front of a guy. And this room is a mess. You should clean it. Kanda, don’t look so stunned and get out! 2nd floor is off limits for guys!”

Nanami curtly gave out her orders. When she did, both Sorata and Mashiro didn’t know how to react.

“Ah~, really. Look at this, underwear are all over the place. You should put away your underwear in a place where others won’t see them.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean why, they’re something that’s embarrassing when others see them.”

“When I’m not wearing them, it’s not embarrassing.”

As she said that, Mashiro picked up a pair of panties.

“It’s just a piece of cloth.”

“Ev.. even so!”

Not being able to follow Mashiro’s train of thoughts, Nanami yelled out in irritation.

“If guys see them, they’ll think of weird things like this and that, and I’ll become like that so…”

Nanami mumbled to herself.

“Is Nanami embarrassed?”

“Of course I am!”

“Why?”

“What do you mean why, that’s because…”

Nanami’s face blushed furiously. Not being able to answer properly, Nanami swiftly

directed her frustration to Sorata.

“Why are you still here!”

“I think your rage towards me is injustice.”

“Sorata agrees with me.”

“Don’t bring me into it!”

Nanami gave him the daggers and asked him with her glaring eyes. If he answered the wrong way, he would be slammed with harsh criticisms.

“I agree with Aoyama. It would be better if you cleaned your room. Not only your underwear, but everything as well.”

“Liar.”

Mashiro quietly grumbled.

“You’re always nonchalantly playing around with my panties.”

“Who played around with them!”

Nanami looked back at him like a robot running low on fuels. Her cold eyes were welcoming him to the underworld.

“Kanda, what is she saying? Care to explain about it further?”

Nanami walked towards him step by step and grabbed him by his collar.

“Wait, isn’t this weird? We were talking about Shiina, I’m…”

“Hurry up and answer me!”

“Ah, yes…”

Being terrified of Nanami, Sorata had to slowly explain about what had happened since April over the next hour.

When Sorata finished explaining, Nanami mumbled to herself tiredly.

"… It's hard to believe it so suddenly."

And she looked towards Mashiro, who was taking a nap under the desk, like as if she was looking at a strange creature.

It was rude to do treat her that way, but Sorata had no right to criticise her. He had showed the exact behaviour quite a few times before as well. It was countless.

While she was famous at school for being a young and mysterious genius artist, no one really knew about Mashiro. They all observed her from a far, and no one actually tried to talk to her and befriend her. Her living in Sakurasou was also one of the reasons why they didn't even try to get to know her.

Since they didn't know anything about her, all that was said about her were positive things, about how she was cute and really talented. Every time she finishes a work in an art class, people would gather before the displayed work and say,

"Shiina is so lucky, being fragile and talented."

"You sort of want to protect her? I think I get you~."

"The boys are so idiotic."

"But I think it's a good thing that she doesn't show off her talents."

"I know. How would you say it, she's like introverted, or elegant, it's really hard to find someone like her these days."

That would sum up on the ways that people thought of Mashiro pretty well. He didn't know why, but whatever Mashiro done, people thought of it to be artistic. Her staring outside mindlessly would be considered to be simply beautiful, or it would be deep. She was probably thinking about eating baumkuchen while looking at the drifting clouds.

During the first semester, every time someone said a rumour about Mashiro, Sorata fell deeper into despair; fearing the day when her true self is found out.

Being trained from a very young age in England, Mashiro didn't have the chance to live an ordinary life, so she was very lacking in common sense.

She still hasn't memorised the path to go from Sakurasou to the school, and he didn't

feel safe letting her to go on a chore. She was very picky with her food, she didn't even put the food near her mouth if she didn't like it and she would give away the foods that she didn't want to others plates with a straight face. Not only wasn't she able to cook rice or do the laundry, she wasn't able to get changed herself or choose her panties. Having someone who was in charge with picking out her clothes. Having some to do all the mundane tasks for her. That was Mashiro's way of thinking.

She didn't study at all, so for the end of term texts, she received a big fat zero for all her subjects.

Leaving nothing behind, Sorata told all of this to Nanami.

"Shiina and Misaki-senpai are the two pillars that support Sakurasou's standards."

Also, even though she was a highly successful artiest, she gave up all of that and came to Japan to become a mangaka and she debuted brilliantly.

With a baffled expression, Nanami bent down to pick up the littered names on the floor.

"But she's really good at drawing."

"I'm telling you, I only told the truth."

Nanami took her eyes off the names.

"Looking at this devastation, it sure is believable."

"Right?"

"Thanks to this, one of the mysteries had been solved."

"Mystery?"

"The roster on the fridge."

"Ah, that…"

It was something that anyone would find strange.

"「Mashiro Duty」is to look after Shiina."

“It’s almost nursing her. Since Shiina is a hopeless fantasy star.”

“But I understand your situation now.”

Sorata sighed in relief. With this, he didn’t need to worry about Plan B or Plan C. Not that he was going to consider Plan C in the first place.

“But I can’t accept it.”

“What?”

“Think about it. It’s bad for Kanda to come up to the second floor where it’s banned for guys, and Shiina should try to do things by herself. Even if other people do things for her, she shouldn’t be getting a guy to clean her room or do the laundry.”

“But there’s no-one else that can help out. The only females here are the lazy teacher and the alien.”

“Didn’t you forget someone?”

“What, no way?”

“From today, I’ll take over the「Mashiro Duty」.”

“I won’t say anything bad, so give it up! You’re busy trying with your part time job and the academy right?! And looking after Shiina isn’t something that a normal person can do. It’s 300 times harder than you think!”

He pointed towards Mashiro under the desk.

“I’ve got it planned out, so it’s ok.”

“It’s useless!”

“I should do it since I’m of the same gender.”

“Come back to yourself!”

“That’s what I should be saying. Or what? Is there a specific reason why you should act as Shiina’s parents?”

“N… no, there isn’t… but…”

Actually there was a reason. There was one, but he couldn't express himself properly. It was because Sorata himself didn't know how he felt. All he knew was that he didn't want to give up on his duty.

"If you don't have a reason, then it's decided."

"It'll be hard you know."

"You don't need to repeat yourself. I'll be fine."

Nanami didn't hesitate at all, and he knew just by looking at her face, that she wasn't going to change her mind now.

But Sorata tried to put up a fight for a little longer.

"But we can't change now. To change the roster, we need to hold a Sakurasou meeting. That's the rule."

"If that's the rule, then it can't be helped."

"Yeah, that's right."

Sorata didn't even have the time to feel safe because Nanami declared,

"Then we'll have a meeting tonight. By the time I'm finished at the academy and my part time job, it would be a little over 10, so we'll start from 11 even though it's a little bit late."

"… Yes, I understand."

Sorata could only say that in reply.

"If you understood, then get out. This is a girl's room."

He couldn't answerback, and he exited the room. Nanami followed behind him and quickly started to get ready saying that it was time to go to the academy. When she was done, she ran outside.

When he waved to Nanami good bye, Chihiro said this behind him.

"You're really an idiot who doesn't plan things."

She was leaning on the wall wearing an annoyed expression with her arms crossed.

“May I hear the reason?”

“If you describe it as troublesome and hard, a girl like Aoyama who is mature would obviously get fired up. Learn more about dealing with women.”

Her style of talking was problematic, but Chihiro was certainly right.

“Did you listen to all of it?”

“I could hear it without meaning to.”

He didn’t know what would happen at the Sakurasou meeting. But he wasn’t looking too forward to it, and it was proved by him sighing unconsciously.

That night, Nanami called for a Sakurasou meeting regarding the change in「Mashiro Duty」. With a face that said that it was something funny, Jin gave his vote in favour to Nanami and Misaki agreed as well. Chihiro and Ryuunosuke who wanted the meeting to finish early, gave their votes in favour and so, Sorata lost his role as the「Mashiro Duty」to Nanami. At the same time, the roster changed to incorporate Nanami into it.

24th of July.

The following were written on the log for Sakurasou meeting.

-- The person in charge of「Mashiro Duty」has been changed. There was a change from Sorata Kanda to Nanami Aoyama by a majority vote. Is this how a log should be written? Secretary- Nanami Aoyama.

-- Fight on, Nanamin! I’ll cheer for you! Added by- Misaki Kamiigusa.

Part 3

From the next day on-wards, Nanami was on「Mashiro Duty」and the day started with her strict regime.

Nanami emphasized on the importance of a regular life style, so she woke Mashiro up at exactly 7 o'clock in the morning and quickly started to teach her how to do the laundry.

But Mashiro isn't the type of a person who would learn quickly. Even though Nanami explained the process countless times and showed her how to do it, she didn't have the motivation to learn. When asked if she understood, she would answer yes, but when you asked her to try, she would add all her coloured clothes and underwear in the washing machine without separating them and press the button.

"Why won't you learn~ how to use the washing machine?"

"It's hard."

"You're able to use a computer, so you should be able to remember it."

"I need it to draw manga. Rita taught me."

Sorata who had come to see how things were going explained to Nanami that Rita was her roommate back when she was in England.

"Memorise how to use a washing machine."

"……"

Mashiro looked aloof and looked at somewhere far away.

"At least respond please."

Eventually, that day, Nanami had to do Mashiro's and her laundry by herself.

When that was done, the two of them started to clean the bathroom. Sorata prayed that nothing would go wrong while he was in the kitchen having breakfast when Nanami's scream came from the bathroom.

When Sorata ran towards the bathroom and reached there, the hose was spraying water everywhere and Nanami was completely drenched. The one who left the tap on had already fled to the change room and it was only Nanami who was seen in an embarrassing situation.

“If you opened the tap, close it afterwards!”

“Nanami, you’re going to get a cold.”

“You were the one who did this…”

“……”

“Don’t lose interest during a conversation…”

Nanami’s voice became threatening. Before she ran out, Sorata wrapped a bath towel around Nanami’s shoulders. Because of the water, the blouse clung onto her and her body was clearly visible so he didn’t know where to look at her.

When Nanami who wrapped herself around looked at Sorata in a way that said ‘you’ve seen it, haven’t you’ in an embarrassed and angry glare, he looked away pretending not to know.

That was how first day went, with Sorata observing the situation with anxiety but after day 2 and day 3, he thought to himself, the situation was what he went through during the recent months and that it would be ok if he left it up to Nanami.

It was refreshing to see Mashiro chat with someone her own age, and the sight of her getting told off by Nanami while doing the laundry was almost heart warming.

“Kohai-kun, it’s putting me off seeing you smirk like that.”

“He looks like an old man watching his grandchildren play in the yard. Isn’t it too early to start growing so old?”

Even though Misaki and Jin who were with him said that…

Apart from that, there had been incidents where Mashiro got lost while shopping or she boldly hung up Nanami’s underwear in the yard and there were also times where Nanami’s roar would shake the dorm. After about a week, Sorata got used to not being on the duty, but he was slightly missing it.

However, even when Sorata stopped helping her, Mashiro would come to him 2 or 3 times a day to ask for his help.

“Sorata, fold my clothes for me.”

And Nanami quickly followed her.

“Shiina, you should be doing your things by yourself!”

“Sorata said that he wanted to do it.”

“I never said that!”

“Don’t pamper Shiina, Kanda.”

“Why am I getting told off?”

Sorata bent down and kindly picked up her clothes that fell out from Mashiro’s hands. Unluckily for him, they were panties.

Letting out a loud yell, Nanami snatched away the panties from Sorata’s hands. It looked like some of Nanami’s clothes were among the pile as well.

Blushing bright red, Nanami called Sorata an idiot, a pervert and almost any insult that she could think of while fleeing from the room. That was what it looked like until she quickly came back and dragged Mashiro out with her.

Last night, it was past 10 o’clock when Mashiro came into Sorata’s room after a shower while he was working on his plan.

“Sorata, dry my hair.”

Right at that moment, they were caught by Nanami who just came back from her work.

“That’s not something that you should be asking a boy to do! And Kanda, don’t do everything a girl tells you to do!”

“But I don’t!”

“Then you do it for me Nanami.”

Nanami grabbed the space shuttle shaped hair dryer from the spur of the moment.

“Ok…”

With a tired face, Nanami and Mashiro went to the bathroom together.

Today, Mashiro came into his room midday holding her book.

“Sorata, do my homework for me.”

“Do it yourself!”

“I don’t get it.”

Hearing the loud noise, Nanami came running.

Briefly judging the situation, Nanami sighed as if she gave up.

“Alright. I’ll make some time each day to help you with your studies.”

“Reconsider it Aoyama. Shiina is a complete idiot.”

“Not necessarily.”

“You be quiet!”

“Shiina, we’ll study together from today starting now. Do you want to join us Kanda?”

“Huh? Then should we go?”

“What?!”

“You were the one who suggested it, so why are you so surprised…”

“I was only joking.”

Actually, it did make sense. If it was the usual Sorata, then he would’ve refused straight away.

But now, he wanted to raise his school grades and as the person who had experienced helping Mashiro to pass her retest, it didn’t feel right to dump all of the responsibilities to Nanami.

“Sorata, do your best.”

“The one who needs to try their best is Shiina!”

So Mashiro often visited him to ask for his help, but since Nanami used her explosive energy to prevent it every time, Sorata didn’t have the chance to help her.

So excluding their study session every morning, Sorata and Mashiro slowly drifted apart and as a result he was free to do whatever he wanted to.

Thanks to that, he gained a surprising amount of free time, so his plan to study programming and his work on the entry was going smoothly.

With programming, he did what Ryuunosuke told him to do by reading the text book example questions and succeeded in making some sort of a calculator program. When he actually saw the programming running on the computer after being scripted and compiled, he felt like he understood a little more about what programming was.

-- During the start, even a dog or a cow would be able to understand. The real challenge is the pointer.

That was something that Ryuunosuke had said to Sorata and even though he didn't understand it, because of his sense of accomplishment, it didn't feel like a real challenge.

For his game submission, he picked out an idea that he thought was the most suitable from a list of ideas that he jotted down during the summer break and started to organise the paperwork.

Since the application for the「Let's make a game」audition didn't require a specific form, he just decided to work on the contents first.

Even today, the first day of August, Sorata was working on his proposal. Sunlight came into his room through the windows. It was already morning.

Squinting his eyes at the bright morning sunshine, Sorata checked over the proposal for the last time.

He thought that he wrote everything that he needed to write. He could feel it from the content. Sorata did the banzaii pose as soon as he finished. Since he was sitting down in the same pose for a long period of time, cracking sounds came from his shoulders and neck.

In the position that he was in, he simply laid back on his bed in a daze.

It felt like he would fall asleep if he shut his eyes, but because of his excitement, he was wide awake. His brain felt empty from the lack of energy.

He was planning on sleeping after he finished working, but it seemed impossible at the moment.

Sitting back on the computer, Sorata looked at the chat room. The person who he wanted to talk to was online.

-- Akasaka, are you awake?

-- I'll be active for the next two and a half hours.

-- If you have the time, can you take a look at my proposal and comment on it?

-- Sure.

Controlling with the mouse and the keyboard, he sent an email to Ryuunosuke.

-- Got it. Just wait for a moment.

-- Sure.

Using that short time, Sorata also read through his proposal again. A puzzle game that utilised the train system in Japan. The aim of the game was to catch a train at a set time by paying the set fees and reach the specified station. Since it passed a station every 2 or 3 seconds, one needed a good control over the tempo of the game. The selling point of the game was to clear each level by switching between the train lines while minimizing the loss of train fare.

He wasn't too confident about the proposal. It was because this was the first game proposal he'd ever done. But he was confident about it because the idea of the game was interesting.

-- I finished reading.

-- Is this good enough?

-- Depending their personal preferences, an idea can be received very differently for people, so all I can say is that it's「interesting」. To be honest, this isn't the type of a material that would be chosen to be worked on. If you send this in to the「Let's Make a Game 」committee, it would be rejected from the start. 100%.

-- You can say some harsh things really easily can't you.

-- If you wanted to hear some nice things, then you shouldn't have asked me.

Hearing the negative comments about his game proposal shook his heart. To ignore the comment would be unsightly, so the only way to deal with the pain was to simply march onwards. He learnt that while watching Mashiro work on her manga. He

couldn't make the wrong decisions when he already knew the answer.

-- So what are the bad parts?

Sweating for some reason, he typed away at the keyboard.

-- You need to condense your proposals into three areas: 「Concept」, 「target」 and 「benefit」[21] while also having something that briefly talks about each of them. Understood?

He knew what the first two mean by their nuance. Those words were often seen while flipping through game magazines. But he had never heard of the third word.

-- Please explain in more detail, sensei.

-- Then I shall start with the 「concept」.

The method of speech changed over to Maid-chan. He must've implemented the mail replying AI program on to the chat room as well.

-- Please take good care of me.

-- 「Concept」 is not a cousin of consents (Emphasis)!

-- I know that much.

-- It was just a small joke. Let's come back to this. 「concept」 is something that covers on 「how the game is interesting」. For a game that is about a hairy warlord from the Romance Of The Three Kingdoms slashing through countless of enemies, then the concept could be expressed as 「Ikkitōsen[22]」. Hence, it means that the game has the fun of slashing away at thousands of enemies. It's not about the warlord being hairy at all. This is just an example, and this might be because of the interactivity, but it seems having two concepts sometimes work well together. In the past, there were works that was a big hit which had the concepts of 「hiding」 and 「hunting」.

-- I see, I'm learning right now.

-- The next point is the 「target」, but this one is pretty basic, indicating the age group or the gender of the consumers. In this case, saying 「Male middle and high school students」 would be suffice. But, in more specific cases, saying 「a certain generation」 or 「light novel readers」 and 「anime fans」 would fit the games better, so please use

the terms accordingly.

-- So you're basically saying decide on who the customers beforehand

-- Yes. The last one is 「benefit」, and this seems to be one of the things the committee looks for in the applications these days. If you think of it literally, it could also mean 「convenience」 for the developers, but the proposal mustn't think of it that way. It's about the game making a difference to the players, whether it be getting 「emotional」, gaining 「knowledge」, satisfying their desire to 「raise a pet」, 「dating a girlfriend」, or 「increasing your metabolism」. So as you can see, there are a lot of different areas a game is able to satisfy. If you know the areas gamers want, then all you have to do is meet their needs by making the game and selling it. In other words, it's about understanding the things the consumer wants. Did you get all that? If you didn't understand, it means that Sorata-sama is worse than trash. If you say that you don't understand, I'll throw you out like trash! This was the very easy to understand lecture by Maid-chan.

He pretended not to see the ones that Maid-chan had written towards the end. Sometimes, Maid-chan let of a dark aurora…. It must've been because of her master's personality.

-- Did you get all that?

-- I've learnt it now thanks to you.

-- Having a 「concept」, 「target」 and 「benefit」 basically shows that you know what kind of a game you want to produce for the set group while benefiting both parties. If you don't fully understand your game proposal, then you won't be able to produce a good game. So in reverse, understanding the three areas means that you have analysed your proposal objectively and you have made it fully yours. I've been hearing that the standard at the 「Let's Make a Game」 has been rising. You can only start off when you have all of these under your full control. After all, you need these if you happen to be accepted for a presentation after your paperwork has passed.

As expected of Ryuunosuke who is working in game related industry, his words were convincing and had a weight to it.

-- I think I underestimated it.

-- You underestimated it too much. You can put in an entry just for the experience, but if you plan to try it for real, don't think of yourself as a high schooler. The ones who

check over your proposals are adults who would spend hundreds and thousands of dollars. It's a business. It's not a childish play.

-- How much salt are you going to spray at my wounds until you're satisfied?

-- And another thing.

-- Another criticism!

-- You need to put in images as well, not only texts. There are a lot of parts in a game proposal that is hard to explain in just words. If you can show your proposal with animated elements, there are no misunderstandings. I'm suggesting images just in case you're not able to do that.

-- Do you know about my art grades?

It was Sorata's worst subject.

-- You don't necessarily have to draw it yourself. Luckily, at Sakurasou, there are two pros that can draw well.

-- Ah, so there's that method.

If it was Mashiro or Misaki, they were certainly good enough. Although, it wouldn't take an ordinary method to get their help…

-- One more thing.

-- How much further are you going to drive me into a corner? Oi, you're a sadist right?

-- You don't need detailed explanations about the hardware side of your game. The main point is to express your idea, and that's all that is needed. All you need to show in your proposal is the main idea and that you are confident about it. The committee would judge it for themselves. It's also them who fill in the supplementing elements.

In Sorata's proposal, it was filled with not only hardware specifications, but also supplementing elements as well.

Even though it was quite cool, his sweat continuously flowed and dropped on to his keyboard.

-- I'll be more careful from now on.

-- It's good to check over your proposal and improve it to a higher quality. It'll be useful for you in the future. To talk about the current industry, 90% of the game creators handle miscellaneous work. They work on the introduction list, introduction to the orderings, checking over and managing the subject, compromising the graphics, writing the specifications for the program, being in charge of conference proceedings, reducing the specifications, subcontract management, test playing, debugging, debugging management, organising the advertisements and articles, checking the game strategy…. The list can go even longer if I chose to list them all. It's probably very different from your image of a game creator, but there are a lot of game creators that work like this. To be honest, I think that it's a bit of a stretch to say that they can be called game creators.

-- Something certainly does feel shabby.

-- Only around 10% of the creators have the right to be called one. Most of them just plan games because they are unable to draw, write scenarios or program. To be called a game creator, you need to be pro at enterprising. Suggesting an idea for a game or writing up a proposal is something even a programmer like myself can do. If you look into some directors, most of them were previously graphic designers or programmers. Some big companies won't even hire game creators without experience. Because they don't need an idealess amateur. That's my two cents worth. So I hope you work harder to produce some solid game proposals worthy of being of called a work from a real game creator.

-- Ye, yeah. I'll do my best.

-- All the best then. Sorry, but there's a request from a motion control middleware, development code「Something chan」. I want to get working. I'm logging off.

-- Ok, thanks for your advices.

-- No problem. I had some time anyway.

With that, Ryuunosuke logged off.

"Anyways, that Akasaka is really amazing…"

This must be what it feels like to be working. Everything from the use of words, way of thinking and the resolve to succeed was on a different level. Although the naming

sense was quite strange…

Thinking about the things Ryuunosuke has mentioned, he looked at his game proposal once more. Almost everything that Ryuunosuke… no Maid-chan had explained during the chat was missing in his proposal.

It looked worse each time he looked at it. Even so, Sorata printed the proposal out and with a red pen; he started to fix his proposal before he forgot about them.

He was unable to sleep feeling like this.

The only relief that he had was that Ryuunosuke didn't mention anything about the game idea itself. Interesting. It was probably a compliment.

Whether it was a compliment or not, Sorata was confident about the idea. He could only believe in himself.

Going through the revision once, he thought that he should sleep now, so he laid on his bed. The cats must've been in other people's rooms, because there were none in his room.

He closed his eyes thinking about the things he should study today. Sleepiness hit him straight away and his conscious drifted to a dream land.

How long did he sleep for.

Hearing footsteps walking into his room, Sorata's conscious partially came back from the dream land to the reality. He left the door open for the cats.

Was it Hikari, Nozomi or Kodama. It was hard to tell from the noises.

It didn't really matter which cat it was. If it was Nanami coming in to wake him up for the study session, then he would have to wake up. But if it really was Nanami, she would call his name out outside the door. Thinking along these lines, he tried to sleep again when the footsteps came closer and came onto his bed. The cats were trying to climb on even in this heat.

Sorata reached out to push the cats away.

If it was by the texture of their hair, it might be possible to tell them apart.

But what his fingers felt was completely different from what he was expecting.

It was softer and rather larger than a cat. It didn't budge with just a small push. The furriness that should've been there wasn't present. The silkiness of the skin could be felt. Rather than a cat's body, it felt like a silk cloth.

Sensing that something wasn't right, Sorata opened his eyes.

Before his eyes, he saw Mashiro's sleeping face.

His stretched out arm was rubbing Mashiro's breasts. Like a prawn jumping, Sorata used his entire body to jump back.

Without himself noticing, he stared at his own hand.

Like what Jin had said before, there really was an unimaginable presence. Now that he found out about the forbidden secret, Sorata fell into anxiety and remorse.

He couldn't resist any longer and quickly got up.

"Hey Shiina."

"… Why?"

Mashiro looked at Sorata with half opened eyes.

"What do you mean why, what are you doing here anyway!"

"Sleeping."

"Sleep in your room."

"… Nanami comes in the morning."

"But don't come to my room!"

According to Nanami's holiday schedule, Mashiro had to wake up at 7 o'clock each morning. Since she wanted to sleep in, she came to his room.

He was happy that she relied on him, but her walking straight into his room felt like she didn't think of him as a male, and he wasn't sure how he should feel.

“I was doing my names…”

Mashiro closed her eyes again.

“If you sleep, then I would get killed!”

“… Sorata”

“Wh, what now.”

“Call me Mashiro when we’re alone.”

“I, I know.”

“Ok…. Then it’s fine.”

She tried to go back to sleep with a satisfied expression.

“Whoa~, wait, don’t sleep! Eh~, ah~, right! You said that you’re getting serialised next time right? Then it must start to look like a real manga.”

“I can do it…”

She did reply, but it looked like Mashiro was about to sleep.

She looked tired so he wanted to let her sleep, but if he did let her, he feared the consequences. He didn’t know what he was going to hear from Nanami.

“Is your name going well?”

She shook her head.

“It’s not…?”

“Yeah.”

He remembered Mashiro working all night on her names at her desk. It’s good if she’s able to produce good names. But when she’s worrying about them, it only looked like she was pushing herself too hard, so he felt sorry for all the work that she put in at night until she fell asleep. It was her will to see things through to the end that drove her body beyond its limits. That was Mashiro’s style of drawing.

“Sorata, Could you do me a favour.”

“Sure, what is it?”

Mashiro’s face had a sense of doubt as she looked at him.

“When the magazine gets published, I want us to go to the bookstore together.”

“The issue when Shiina… no, Mashiro’s debuts? When does it come out?”

“The 12th.”

“Ok. I understand.”

“It’s not your duty, but is that ok?”

“I can promise you.”

Sorata turned his head away in shyness. Then Mashiro extended her pinkie at him.

“Promise.”

Wordlessly, Sorata hooked his own finger as well.

“Now sleep.”

“Sorata.”

“What?”

“… I’m glad that we talked.”

Mashiro fell asleep as she let her finger go. Her face looked very happy.

“Really, what does she mean?”

Sorata carefully got off the bed so that he wouldn’t make any noise and looked at Mashiro’s sleeping face.

It had only been a week since he was freed from Mashiro Duty, but he really missed it.

He wanted to look for a little longer, but he couldn’t just look at her thoughtlessly. The

time had already passed 7 o'clock. It was about time for Nanami to come and wake Mashiro up. If she noticed that Mashiro wasn't in her room, she would come here first.

He thought that he should wait, so he came out of his room.

He went to the stairs to see what was going on upstairs. However, there were no signs of Nanami and it was pretty quiet.

Thinking to himself that this was rather strange, he noticed something in the kitchen.

Sorata carefully looked into the kitchen.

The guest was resting on the round table without moving.

Looking at the person carefully, he was surprised to see that it was actually Nanami. She was wearing the same outfit as the one that she wore when she went out yesterday. She should've gone to the academy and then her part time job, so he didn't know what time she got back.

Below her arms was a stack of paper. It was dialogues of some sort with bits of marks on it in red pen. It must've been some script.

Even thought it was summer, it looked like she might catch a cold. So Sorata returned to his room, brought back a blanket and tried to cover Nanami's shoulders with it.

At that instant, Nanami opened her eyes. By an accident, her eyes met Sorata's who was about to put the blanket around her. If they were a few centimetres closer, they could've kissed.

Nanami blinked two or three times and silently looked at Sorata. Her sleepiness slowly disappeared from her eyes. Her eyes turned into ones of fear.

"Ka, Kanda…"

She was talking in her dialect.

"No, Aoyama, this is!"

"So you were aiming for my body!"

Nanami forcefully hit his nose. Hit with the impact, Sorata jerked up, and backed away around three steps. He felt the unique pain from his nose. Tears flowed and dripped onto the floor and his nosebleed dripped red rain on the floor. The hand that was gripping his nose was already dyed red.

During that time, Nanami fled to a corner of the kitchen and like a herbivore trying to protect itself, she squatted down like a scared little rabbit.

"I, I was an idiot for trusting you."

"Will you please listen to me, Aoyama-san."

He was unable to hold back looking his pitiful self covered in tears and blood.

"I, I'll tell the teacher on you! Try to eat cold rice!"

"Calm down! Look at the situation!"

"I do know what's going on! You sneak into someone else's room and… wait, what?"

Realising something, Nanami slowly got up.

"This isn't my room…"

She checked around once more. They were in the kitchen. She had a blanket around her. And Sorata. She looked up at the ceiling trying to remember what had happened.

"Do you remember now? You understood?"

"Can't be…"

"Yes, that's right."

"You saw my sleeping face?"

"Is that what you're trying to say!"

Nanami quickly covered her face and ran out from the kitchen. She must've gone to the basin. He could hear the sound of the water running.

Sorata sighed and stuck in some rolled up tissues in his nose. Blood kept dripping onto the floor. It must've been a double nosebleed. It was the first time to experience

it in his 16 year old life.

When he had finished dealing with the nose bleed, Nanami came back after having washed her face, tidied her fringe and clothes. She must've at least felt sorry, because she didn't laugh at the sight of Sorata with both of his nostrils blocked with tissues. She quickly looked away to hide it. But her shoulders were slightly shaking.

"Sorry."

"Well its fine, but if you look at the wall while you say that."

"It's funny to watch."

"Whose fault do you think this is!"

"I told you I was sorry."

"Never mind. Other than that, hmm... yeah."

Sorata stopped himself from asking if she was ok. He knew that she Nanami would answer that she's fine regardless because he heard it from Chihiro.

But when he stopped himself, he didn't know what to say next.

He stiffly turned away to look somewhere else and is eyes found a good topic on the table.

"Ah, that one? There's a performance at the academy on the 21st. It's something to perform then."

"Is it an anime?"

"No, just a normal one… a play."

"Mhmm."

"You've at least heard of Shakespeare right?"

He only knew Romeo and Juliet, but he confidently nodded his head.

"So you do things like play as well."

“I’m not sure if it can be classified to be the same thing, but I’m learning about acting in general.”

“What? So you’re not dubbing?”

“We’ve only acted once in front of a mike before in a special session. At our academy, we focus on the basics of acting first and they aim to produce performers. We have singing or dancing lessons as well.”

“Heh~, so that’s what an academy is about.”

“So, have you practiced a lot?”

He looked back at the script.

“I only got it yesterday. I thought that I should read over it and memorise some lines but.”

“You fell asleep half way?”

“I must have.”

Nanami shrank to show that she was reflecting on it.

“Is that performance important?”

“Who knows. I’m not sure how important it is. The auditions for the agency are in February and the people who we perform to are different as well…. But people like managers do come and see the performance so you can’t say that it’s not important.”

Then he couldn’t say don’t push yourself too hard. Even if he did, she wouldn’t listen.

Unable to deal with the silence, Sorata opened the fridge. He took out a carton of milk, but it was nearly empty.

“Ah, Kamiigusa-senpai asked me to buy it… sorry,”

Checking the roster on the fridge, the one on roster that week was certainly Nanami.

“Never mind. I’ll buy some more when I go out. You should go to your room and sleep some more.”

She would have to go to her work after the academy finishes today as well. To pay back the late regular dorms fees, Nanami was working not only at the ice cream shop, but also at family restaurants and donut shops ever since the summer break began. She didn't even have an hour to spare on her tight schedule.

"No, it's ok. I'm on the roster, so I'll quickly go now."

Nanami took out the purse from the cupboard that contained the shared money for Sakurasou grocery fees and said that she would quickly go to the convenience store.

Unable to see Nanami push herself any further, Sorata grabbed her by the arm as she was about to go.

"Do you have anything else that you need?"

"Aoyama, you should really sleep. I'll go grocery shopping later."

He repeated himself once more.

"I'll be back soon. The convenience store is near here right?"

"Just thankfully accept someone's act of kindness. Why are you being so stubborn about it."

Then Nanami shook Sorata's hand off.

"What are you saying? You're just forcing me."

Nanami snapped at him. There was no hint of friendliness from her cold glare. The atmosphere instantly froze as well.

Unlike Nanami who was acting cold, Sorata's emotions rapidly set alight and he felt like he was seeing everything in red.

"Why are you talking like that!"

He couldn't stop his voice rising. However, Nanami didn't even flinch at his pressure and maintained her overwhelming coldness. She didn't even try to step back even a millimetre.

"I'm fine. I don't need your help. I can take care of it by myself so don't worry about

it.”

“Is that something that you should be saying? Collapsing over here?”

“I’m fine though.”

Both of them knew that they were just ranting at each other. But now that they’ve started, they could only go further by using abusive words just to protect themselves. They didn’t know how to comfort or accept on another.

“Ah~ really now? Well do whatever you want!”

Actually, that wasn’t what he wanted to say. But now that they’ve started fighting, his anger didn’t calm down easily.

“I’ll do so anyway.”

Nanami quickly turned around and tried to walk out of the kitchen.

But unluckily, she ran into Jin who was just coming back.

“I’m happy about the way you feel about me, but I was at Rumi’s house doing it up to three times, so I can’t do it anymore. Do you mind doing it next time?”

Nanami pushed him away to get away from him.

“You really like to ignore curfews and getting permission for sleepovers don’t you Mitaka-senpai! Please stick to them!”

“I can do that, but I’m the type of a guy who can’t sleep unless there is the warmth of someone by my side. If you sleep with me, then I can come back every night though Aoyama.”

Nanami looked at him with a sharp glare. And she curtly said that she’s leaving and went out the door.

“Ah well, I got told off. How scary.”

Jin shivered looking at Sorata.

“Sorry for getting you wound up into this mess.”

“That’s alright. I don’t mind that side of you, going head on with your problems is something that I can’t even mimic.”

“… You’ve seen it all?!”

Jin smiled on purpose, lifting up the corners of his mouth.

“I can’t do that~. Saying something like「Why are you being so stubborn about it」to someone.”

That was also something that Sorata was reflecting on. But how would he say it, swapping the shopping duty on the roster wasn’t something significant. Until now, Jin or Misaki would often swap their roster to suit themselves. It just didn’t work with Nanami.

“Anyways, just make sure you guys make up.”

To be honest, he didn’t feel apologetic or wanted to apologize. He didn’t think that he’s done anything wrong.

Jin returned to his room and only Sorata remained in the kitchen.

Thinking quietly for a while, he remembered the about the game proposal. He wanted to sleep right now. But his bed was being occupied by Mashiro.

“Then where should I sleep?”

Part 4

When the second week of August arrived, Sakurasou became quieter than before. This wasn't something that Sorata felt, but there were two reasons for it.

One was because Misaki who went on a carnival everyday had shut herself in her room working on a new animation for real. Jin had written up a play script to go with the Misaki mentioned before. The length would be over 45 minutes. It was the longest work done by her to this date.

"Even Misaki wouldn't be able to finish it until the graduation. So with that, I'll be free from now."

Jin said that as soon as he finished working on the play script and it bothered Sorata. But he Sorata didn't even get a chance to ask and he fled to one of his lover's house.

He was probably planning to enjoy himself to the fullest.

Another reason was because the number of times Nanami yelled out was reduced as she got used to dealing with Mashiro.

After having the small fight with Sorata, Nanami's way of dealing with Mashiro has gotten thorough, and Mashiro was able to do some of her own laundry by herself. Of course, she still caused catastrophes if she done it by herself though…. But it looked like Mashiro was doing well with her names and her preparation.

Other than that, from that time, Nanami didn't slip up on her duties on the roster. She emphasised that she was doing well enough by herself without anyone else's help. And the way she treated Sorata was the same as before, pretending nothing happened between them. She kept her usual calm expression during their morning study sessions, and she didn't even bring up their fight.

Even when their eyes met occasionally,

"Is there something that you don't get Kanda?"

"No, it's not that."

“If you don’t want to study, then you don’t have to join us. Also, that answer is wrong.”

“Huh? Really? Ah, you’re right.”

“Get your act together.”

Like so, it looked like she was actually concerned about Sorata.

Sorata noticed that Nanami’s thorough attitude was just a declaration of war.

However, against someone like Nanami who done everything perfectly, Sorata wasn’t able to do anything against her and so could only live his day being wary of Nanami.

And half way through the week, when the 10th came, Sorata wasn’t able to put up with it for any longer so he went to Jin to get some counselling from him.

He knocked on Jin’s door.

“It’s open.”

He poked his head in the doorway and checked with Jin.

“Do you have time?”

Sitting at his desk, he was looking at his laptop display when he answered.

“If you ask with such a gloomy expression, then I can’t refuse can I?”

When he went into the room, he sat on the bed. If he sat on the bed, there would be a reasonable distance between them if Jin was to turn his chair around.

Sorata waited for Jin’s fingers to stop moving.

He was probably fixing a few things on the screenplay for Misaki’s new anime. He was wearing his rare serious expression. His already mature face looked even more mature.

After around 5 minutes, Jin yawned loudly to the ceiling.

When he was done with that, he faced Sorata and rubbed his eyes after taking his glasses off.

“What’s with your serious expression? Are you worried because your prime hasn’t hit you yet?”

“No.”

“That’s just an urban legend you know.[23]”

“So what I’m saying is… what?! Really?! … I actually believed that….”

“In your case, you would actually need to notice it when it comes, whether it comes or not.”

He didn’t understand and wanted to ask further, but Jin simply put his glasses back on.

“So? What did you want?”

“It’s about Aoyama.”

“Did you get confessed?”

“No! Is it really that fun making fun of me?”

“Yep.”

Jin playfully replied. It was baffling to see someone like him make a childish face.

“Are you worried about Aoyama?”

“Well… rather than being worried. Should I say that it’s stressing…. To myself as well but….”

It was hard to find the words to explain himself. But he felt that things shouldn’t stay this way.

“What do you think about Mashiro?”

“Why are you asking about Shiina?”

“Well, I don’t know why you chose to reply like that.”

At the unexpected question, Sorata’s face turned bitter.

“What do you want to do with Aoyama?”

“If you ask it like that…. I don’t think she needs to do everything by herself just because she has a good way of doing things. Since we’re all living in Sakurasou together, I feel like that we should help each other… something like that I guess.”

Choosing his words carefully, Sorata tried to explain his thoughts. It didn’t quite feel like that he was able to say what he wanted to fully. However he wasn’t too far off the target.

“That’s very different from my impressions.”

“When you say impressions, are you talking about Aoyama? How are they different?”

“Never mind. Forget what I just said. Anyways, things are going the way Aoyama wants it to go to, so just let Aoyama fool you continuously.”

Hearing that really bothered him.

“More than that, you’re not trying to be a hero of justice again are you?”

“… I won’t. This time, it’s different.”

“If you say so. Just work steadily towards your goal.”

“I am doing that. Please take a look at my game proposal sometime senpai.”

He came to get counselled after he finished editing his proposal. All he needed to do was to have an illustration to go with it. He was thinking about asking Misaki instead of Mashiro since she knew a lot more about games, but it was hard to get the right timing to ask since she was very busy working on her anime.

“A game proposal huh. I’ll look forward to it.”

At that moment, Jin’s phone rang. It must’ve been one of his many lovers. But he didn’t pick up the phone until it finished ringing.

“Is it ok not to answer that?”

“I haven’t finished talking with you yet.”

"… What you just said, it sounded pretty cool."

"Just don't fall for me."

If he dropped the last part, then he would've looked very cool.

"I don't think you would understand even if I say it, but in Aoyama's case, she fought back against her parents' wishes and came up here from Osaka by herself. She was by herself ever since she left home. So she probably thinks that she should be doing everything by herself."

"So are you telling me to let her be?"

"I would probably do that. It doesn't really matter to me what you do. It'll be good to think about it, Kohai-kun."

Jin got up from his seat and placed his hand on Sorata's head.

"Please don't do that."

Sorata shook off Jin's hand and got up as well. As he did, a pile of books on the floor toppled over.

"Ah, sorry about that."

He quickly reached down to restack them and grabbed a question book.

He had only done it by reflex. This was a book used by students who were preparing to sit for the entrance exams. But it was odd that there were study materials in Jin's room.

Looking carefully, there were other books as well. Reference books. Practice exam question books. There was even a past exam of an Arts university in Osaka.

Then he suddenly remembered something that he had long forgotten. He saw Jin before discussing something with Takatsu-sensei who was in charge of career choices. That was the day when he followed Mashiro for her retests.

Putting the evidences together, the whole picture was formed.

But it couldn't be. He hoped that it wasn't true.

Hoping that that was the case, Sorata looked at Jin with doubtful eyes and Jin took them head on. His wish to deny that it wasn't true started to crack.

"Senpai, what's going on?!"

He pushed the question books in his hand to Jin.

"It's not something to get fussy about."

"It is something to get fussy about! So… what about your uni?"

"I won't be going to Suimei."

The rather shocking truth smacked his head.

"You're going to leave the elevator system?"

"I already left it."

"What?!"

"No, I didn't even hand in the paperwork."

"… What are you saying?"

He'd thought that Jin would go to the Literacy Department and Misaki would go to Media Department. No, that was what he heard from Misaki, so he didn't really hear about it from Jin himself. It was Sorata who had just thought that they would remain at Suimei after graduating from high school.

"I'll be entering Osaka's University of Arts. That's all there is to it."

"Wait a second! What about Misaki-senpai!"

What does Misaki have to do with anything?

"It's probably because of her you're not trying to go to Suimei right?"

"… Even if that is the case, it's not something you should be worried about."

The change of tone in his voice clearly had irritation mixed in with it.

“That might be so…… but.”

“Don’t tell Misaki. When the time comes, I’ll tell her properly.”

“… Why.”

“Because you’re wearing such a tired expression.”

Jin was awkwardly smiling in a way that he’d never seen before. Sorata couldn’t understand what Jin had said. But he knew how serious Jin was about this. If he gave up on the elevator system, he couldn’t back out. He could only leave Suimei.

“What kind of a face should I put on when I’m playing or talking with Misaki-senpai from now on…?”

“Just act the way that you’ve always been. You’re someone who doesn’t know anything. Like that. Simple right?”

“It’s impossible!”

“Do it even if it’s impossible.”

Being unable to put up with Jin’s selfish request, Sorata stopped his tears and ran out from the room.

He punched the wall in the hall way twice.

All that came up on his mind was Misaki’s innocent face.

Not wanting to be seen by anyone, he briskly returned to his room.

When he opened his door, Sorata was unable to move.

Out of all the people that he didn’t want to see, the person sat at the table humming a mysterious song while smoothly sketching with a long pencil.

He took some deep breaths. Act as usual. All he had to do was to act natural. While he was thinking on how he normally acted, Misaki turned around.

“Kohai-kun! What do you think of this?”

What Misaki showed was an A4 piece of paper. It was Sorata's game proposal print out. He left an empty space on the paper for illustrations and seeing Misaki's rough sketches he felt like that it captured his ideas onto an image.

"Wow, this is good."

He exclaimed honestly.

"But how did you know about it?"

He hasn't said anything to her yet.

"Kohai-kun's cry of plea came to me with a beep sound."

"No way."

"Yep. I was working hard to reduce the frames so that 3Ds gets animated like cells. And when I did it, it was really well done and the unique motion found in 3D animation was replaced with a sleek motion! So I was really surprised when I rendered it in HD."

"Ah, right……"

What kind of a talk was this?

"It took so much longer than a SD! There're lot of time to kill while it renders. I'm going to ask Ryuunosuke to make a rendering server for me~!"

Sorata didn't even understand half of what Misaki had just said, but he thought that it might be better if he didn't ask.

"By the way, why don't you refer Akasaka by a nickname?"

"Well ok. We'll call him Akutagawa!"

"He is the most popular Ryuunosuke out there, but don't use that![24]"

"Then Dragon![25]"

So he'd just become a non-human. He deeply apologised to Ryuunosuke for bringing up the nickname with Misaki. Sorry, Dragon….

“Anyways! I had nothing to do while it was rendering, so I came here to play with Kohai-kun! Then there was something here! On the place for the illustration, it said「I should ask the lovely Misaki-senpai for help. It’s embarrassing, but I must confess this feeling! Love! Love」on it. So I drew it for you.”

“All I wrote was「Illustrations by Misaki-senpai」! Don’t miss interpret it by yourself!”

Sorata let it go for now and picked up the game proposal. He started to check through the contents. It was good. It was very good. Thanks to the illustrations, the proposal finally looked like the real thing.

“If you’re ok with this, I’ll scan it later and colour it as well.”

“Thank you.”

“But is it really ok for me to do it? Did you ask Mashiron to do it as well? Did she reject you? Poor Kohai-kun! I should comfort you then.”

“Why are you bringing up Shiina?”

“Hmm~ well…”

He hoped that she would answer properly.

“A woman’s intuition?”

Did she tilt her body to show that she was unsure? He didn’t have a clue what she meant. In these situations, it was better to ignore the act completely. Especially if it was Misaki…

But when it looked like she was about to say something serious, Misaki was just playing around with the cats on the bed.

She was as capricious as ever.

When he left her to do whatever she wanted, Misaki tried to talk to him.

“Hey, Kohai-kun.”

Misaki hugged Hikari the white cat, who had been getting fatter recently. Hikari, being

squashed against the large breasts looked uncomfortable

“What is it?”

“Yeah…. You know.”

Her hyper mood that was still on moments ago disappeared without a trace. And when he realised that that talk was coming, it was too late.

“… What should I do to get Jin to look at me?”

If he said anything, then his agitation would show. So he could only answer back in silence.

“Are you listening to me?”

“… I’m listening.”

How did this talk start even in this situation? He just came back from Jin’s room hearing that he’ll be leaving Suimei. Hence, it meant that he wanted to put a distance between Misaki….

“Tha, that’s…. Senpai, what do you want to do with Jin-senpai?”

“What do you mean…. I want us to be a couple.”

“In more detail?”

“I want to chuu him…”

“Chuu?”

“No, kiss~.”

Misaki protested with a cute face sticking her lips out. How did she turn so feminine if the conversation was about Jin? Sorata found that to be fascinating. Normally, she was a fearless alien though.

She was afraid of being disliked by Jin. She was in pain knowing that her feelings weren’t reaching Jin.

“I want to walk hand in hand….”

He felt so sorry for her that he couldn’t to watch for any longer.

“I want to hug him tightly….”

His nose started to get moist. It was no good. If he listened for any longer, he might cry.

“But… I just don’t know what to do. How do other people become couples? What am I lacking? Do I need to live like this for the rest of my life... help me Kohai-kun.”

Hugging her knees on the bed, Misaki looked at him with almost teary eyes.

Since Jin warned him not to say anything about the external entrance exams he wasn’t able to say anything about that. If someone asked him which side he was on, he was obviously on Misaki’s side. He could slightly understand Jin. But he couldn’t see the reason why Jin chose to let Misaki suffer like this.

But in the end, he was unable to say anything of help.

“Senpai is cute, so it’s ok.”

He could only say that and wait for Misaki to resume the conversation.

“Thanks Kohai-kun. I think I feel a little better now.”

When he heard her reply he felt half redeemed. The other half felt like crying because of his powerlessness.

“Do you want to play some games until the morning for the change of mood?”

“Ho, for you to challenge me, you’ve grown Kohai-kun~.”

He turned on the device and got the controllers.

“Kohai-kun.”

“Yes?”

“Let’s play it up during this summer.”

“What are you saying all of a sudden?”

“Well that’s because it’s our last summer as a high school student for Jin and I.”

Misaki’s words drove deep into Sorata’s heart.

Today was really dangerous. There were too many attacks that attacked his tear sac directly. Sorata quickly sniffed back his snot. When Misaki started the match, he just wasn’t able to act out.

“Geez~, really Kohai-kun. What are you doing! Now is not the time to stand there in a daze!”

Their everyday life that he took for granted was going to change within a few months. By next year’s summer, Misaki or Jin won’t be here in Sakurasou. This was something that was unpreventable no matter how much he begged for it, and imagining Sakurasou without the two members, his nose got moist once more.

To hide the fact, he let out a large yell on purpose.

“It, it’s because senpai said the weird thing!”

“I didn’t say anything weird!”

Smiling innocently, Misaki looked at Sorata.

“It’s alright! I’m still here.”

“… This is the first time. Misaki-senpai saying something senpai like.”

“That means that you have matured Kohai-kun! So you have finally realised my greatness.”

“What are you saying! I won’t lose next time.”

“Well the loser has to sneak into Nanamin’s room and steal a panty from her closet.”

“That’s a disadvantage for me!”

Recovering their usual rhythm, Sorata and Misaki continued to play games until Nanami came home from work and told them off for making too much noise.

Seeing Misaki off to her room and after being lectured by Nanami, Sorata crawled onto a corner of his bed so that he wasn't disturbing the cats that were already sleeping.

He closed his eyes. Being left in the darkness made him remember bits and pieces of what happened recently.

The morning when he fought with Nanami.

Jin's cold expression when he said that he'll be sitting external entrance exams.

Misaki who was happy without knowing anything.

Jin and Misaki will disappear from Sakurasou next year. The graduation was in March. Only 7 months remained. It was far away from now. But that day was certainly approaching each day.

He wondered how many things will happen during that time. Will he be able to get along with Nanami? What will happen to Jin and Misaki? He thought that Mashiro will be successful as a mangaka. Ryuunosuke would probably be the same as now. Then what about me.

When he started to think of the answer, he wasn't able to think of one so he wasted his time.

Sorata gave up on sleeping. He wasn't in the mood to stay inside either, so he went into the hallway. Only the hotness and the silence were present. The aged floorboards squeaked as he stepped on it.

Seeing a ray of light coming from the kitchen, Sorata poked his head in.

The person who was there was Chihiro. Watching her hold a drinking party by herself made him feel better.

Chihiro who was reading a postcard looked up.

"It's time for kids to be sleeping."

"It's time for adults to be sleeping as well."

The clock pointed towards 2 o'clock.

"Is it a letter?"

Chihiro wordlessly ripped the postcard and threw it in the bin.

"Should you be doing that?"

"Even if I go to a reunion, I would have to listen to all the boasting or ranting of people."

"I'm sure you can handle it… right?"

"If you get to my age, you would realise."

What would he be doing in 10 years from now? He couldn't imagine it. Before that, he wondered when he would become an adult.

"There's also someone that I don't want to meet."

Chihiro gulped down the beer.

"Is it your ex?"

He only said it as a joke, but Chihiro suddenly stopped moving. But she resumed drinking the beer, pretending that nothing happened.

"So, what do you want? Are you expecting me to comfort you?"

"… I won't touch you today."

"Don't think of your teacher in perverted situations."

"Your existence itself is comforting sensei. It feels like I can live without any worries."

"Your problems are probably about Aoyama, Mitaka or Kamiigusa right?"

Getting out a new can of beer from the fridge while saying that it's a bother, what Chihiro said was all true so Sorata was rather surprised.

"You're the type of a person who is always at loss. You get dragged around by other

people's troubles, get emotionally disturbed and not be able to sleep at night. You really are an idiot."

Chihiro came back to her seat and opened the can. And she immediately put her mouth at the opening and slurped at the foam.

"Sensei, do you have something against me? Is it really that enjoyable to harass me?"

"No~."

That answer was also depressing. She was treating him this way for no reason.

"Ah, that's right. Give this to Mashiro."

She pushed an envelope that was on the table. It was a bad habit of Sorata's to accept everything when someone tells him to do something.

It was an envelope with blue and red stripes around its edge. It was an airmail. The address and the name were written in English. It was his first time seeing an airmail so he looked turned it over to look at the back.

The senders name was written on it.

It read Adel Ainsworth.

"It's a guy's name."

For no reason, he looked at Chihiro with a serious expression.

"Don't make that scary face. I can see your jealousy on your face."

"Wh, who is?"

He wondered how the sender was related to Mashiro. The looks… the age… what kind of a guy was he… and what was written on the letter? He was bothered by it.

"Ah, good timing."

He looked around and saw Mashiro. She must've been working hard on her name for her serialisation. He could tell by the expression on her face. Even when she wasn't near a desk, her level of concentration didn't drop. She looked nervous, and that was

probably because her names weren't going so well.

Mashiro looked at Sorata and Chihiro once and went to the cupboards and started to search for something. She took out a cup ramen, carried it with both of her hands as if it was something precious and placed it in front of Sorata.

"Make it for me."

Sorata cooked the cup ramen for her without a complaint. While they were waiting for 3 minutes, he gave her the letter that he got from Chihiro.

Without hesitation, Mashiro opened the envelope and took out the letter. He knew that it was ill mannered to do so, but he glanced at the letter. But since the letter was in English, he couldn't understand it.

He was unable to tell anything from Mashiro's expressionless face.

There was a suffocating silence until she finished reading the letter. When she had finished, Sorata asked her.

"Who's the sender?"

His voice shook a bit.

"A special person."

At her words, Sorata's heart beat faster. That soon transformed into a tightening pain and it took control of Sorata's heart.

All his other worries about Nanami, Jin and Misaki were all swept away by his new dilemma which was…

Mashiro. All that remained in his heart was now Mashiro. He tried to ask a different question just to make sure of something.

"When you say special…"

He started begging in his heart.

Mashiro looked up from the letter. She looked at Sorata.

“A person that I like.”

He heard everything crashing down in his head. The sound of a glacier being split in half. He could only see whiteness, and he was unable to tell which direction he was looking at.

A special person

A person that she liked.

That only pointed to one thing.

Something that he kept dear was in shambles. Sorata couldn’t understand properly or think straight.

“I… I see…”

He unsteadily got up. He had to lean on the table to support himself. An invisible force was gripping his heart. He felt gutted and couldn’t breathe properly.

His sense of direction disappeared and he repeated saying「No」in his head countless of times. No, I didn’t get hurt. No, it doesn’t really matter for me. No, I don’t think of it that way. No, this isn’t it…

But no matter how many excuses he thought out, he didn’t even feel better. Instead of feeling better, he felt even more depressed.

“Sorata?”

At Mashiro’s worried voice, Sorata came back to his senses.

“I’m pretty sleepy, so I’ll sleep now. Good night.”

He quickly left the kitchen with those words.

He hurriedly ran to his room. He slammed the door shut and leaned against it. Sorata was hit with a sense of emptiness and could only squat down on the floor. And he looked at his stretched legs in a daze.

Chapter 3 - Now is only the present, and hence the present.

Part 1

The sun rose. According to the weather channel, it was going to be sunny three days straight. Today was going to be hot and stuffy all day. Even though it was already the 20th, later half of August, autumn seemed so far away.

After pulling an all nighter, Sorata sat down at the computer to submit his game proposal.

He filled in the required forms and spaces, and re-read what he had filled in. All he had to do now was to press the 'Submit' button.

Sorata thought that his proposal has improved a lot thanks to Ryuunosuke's advices.

Since the proposal included Misaki's illustrations and some key phrases that Jin suggested, it was attractive and couldn't be compared to his original text-only proposal. It actually looked like a proper game proposal.

When he showed it to Ryuunosuke just a few moments ago, he didn't get criticized like before.

Sorata had done his best, and he had a sense of accomplishment about it.

Being confident about it, his determination of submitting it to「Let's make a game」was solidified.

Following the on-screen instructions, he quickly filled out the required spaces in under 5 minutes. One click was all that was needed to submit his proposal.

The hand that was holding the mouse was getting drenched in sweat, and his stomach started to twist and turn. Sorata was faced with the nervousness and excitement that he had never experienced before.

It was the first time for his body to respond so honestly. He wasn't this terrified even when he first came to Sakurasou.

Let's count to ten and then submit it.

He took some deep breaths and started the countdown in his head.

10, 9, 8… 7 as he started to count, Nozomi jumped onto the desk. Thanks to that, Sorata accidently clicked the submit button.

The screen changed and displayed「Your application was successful. Thank you.」

Nozomi wore a proud face while sitting on the table.

“Why you….”

And out of all the cats, it happened to be Nozomi. A black cat. He felt at unease….

But there was no point to complain about it now, so Sorata turned off the browser and dejectedly turned off the computer. The process would take at least a week even if it came out early.

企画書『ゲーム作ろうぜ』用

とれいん・とれいん（仮）

～新感覚電車乗り換えパズルゲーム～

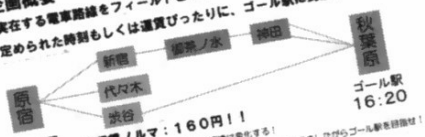
携帯ゲーム機用ダウンロード販売コンテンツ

エントリーNO. 780411　神田空太

■企画概要

実在する電車路線をフィールドとした新感覚パズルゲーム

定められた時刻もしくは運賃ぴったりに、ゴール駅に到着することが目的



☆運賃ノルマ：160円！！

通るルートによって到着時刻と運賃は変化する！

一駅を数秒で走る電車を次々に乗り換えて、ノルマを達成しながらゴール駅を目指せ！！

■コンセプト

何が面白いの？

時間にピッタリ、
お金にピッタリ、
乗り換えもピッタリが気持ちいい！

■ゲームフロー

1．ノルマの決定

2．スタート駅から出発

ゲーム開始！！

スタート駅から電車は自動的に走り出す

一駅あたり数秒でスピーディに通過する

3．乗り換え駅に接近！

乗り換え可能な駅に接近すると

画面左下に情報ウィンドウが開く

・乗り換えのできる電車が表示される

・各乗り換え電車の出発時刻がわかる

情報をもとにプレイヤーは経路を選択

・選択時間は数秒間しかない！（難易度で速度は変化）

4．『3』の乗り換え選択を繰り返す

乗り換え可能駅に接近するたびに、ルート選択

待ち時間なしの乗り換えをするとスコアアップ！

連続させればコンボでさらにボーナスがつく！！

・ただし、乗り換えに時間のかかる駅もあるので注意！

5．ゴール駅に到着　華麗に乗り換えろ！

現在時刻

例えば新宿駅に接近した場合

山手線	内16:02	外16:03
埼京線	上16:02	下16:10
京王線		下16:09
小田急		下16:09
○マンスカー		下16:15
丸ノ内線	上16:05	下16:15 …etc.

パズル感覚で選択可能

■ゲームモード紹介

シングルプレイ

○ミッションモード

スタート駅を出発し、ノルマを達成した上でゴールすればクリア

クリア後は次のミッションへと進むもっともシンプルなモード

○とれいん・とれいんモード

ゴール駅に到着すると、次のノルマとゴール駅が即座に提示

ノルマ未達にならない限り、永遠に乗り換えパズルを堪能できる

マルチプレイ

○アドホック通信対戦モード（最大４人まで遊べる）

携帯ゲーム機を持ち寄り、友達同士でわいわいと遊ぶことができる

○遠距離通信対戦モード（最大８人まで遊べる）

アクセスポイントを経由して遠くの人とも対戦を楽しむことができる

○犯人追跡モード

ひとりが犯人となって逃亡、他プレイヤーは協力して追いかける

■ターゲット

・暇つぶし感覚でゲームを遊ぶライトユーザー層

・一部鉄道ファン

ちょっとした時間ができると、ついつい遊んでしまうゲームを目指す

■ベネフィット

○どんな利得があるの？

・普段は乗らない全国の路線に遊んでいるだけで詳しくなれる

・乗り換え、乗り継ぎのテクニックを見つけられる

・乗車時間や運賃を把握できて、どこにだって行きやすくなる

○娯楽としてはどうなの？

・時間的、運賃的に無駄のないピッタリ乗り換えが快感！

・不可能と思えるノルマを突破した瞬間の達成感が最高に気持ちいい！！

○難しくないの？

・電車の知識がなくてもパズル感覚でルートを組み合わせて遊べる！

Until then, he had nothing to do.

Sorata leaned back on his chair and let out a loud yawn. For now, he finished what he had to do.

For no apparent reason, Sorata cried out.

Being startled, the cat glared at Sorata in protest.

He just couldn't calm down. He picked up Nozomi who was trying to sleep on the table. Nozomi who was about to fall asleep seemed to be bothered about it, but Sorata wanted to share some of his happiness.

He patted its head lovingly. However, Nozomi wiggled out from his hug and ran away.

Sorata gave up on sharing some of his happiness with the cat and leaned back on his chair and looked up at the ceiling. He cleared his head looking at the wooden ceiling.

He closed his eyes slowly.

He didn't want to do anything. It felt like he couldn't do anything. His strength left his body and he felt exhausted. Now that he thought about it, Mashiro was in the same state as him, trying to finish her manga manuscripts.

Thinking of Mashiro in his empty head, it quickly filled up with thoughts of Mashiro.

The letter that was addressed to Mashiro. A special person. Someone that she liked.

He witnessed Mashiro, who held almost no emotions for other people, asking Nanami on how to send a letter back on the next day.

Mashiro looked happy as she left towards the post office, but on the other hand, watching that made Sorata feel worse.

He didn't really understand what the circumstances were. He tried to muster up the courage to ask her every morning study session, but he didn't want to be disappointed by the response so he still couldn't ask for nearly a week. He always chickened out when it came to these decisive things.

That was why Sorata decided to turn a blind eye to the reality and concentrate on his

game proposal. Whenever he had some time on his hands, he always thought about useless things but over the last few days, it felt like he had been really productive.

However, now that he was finished with the game proposal with nothing to do left, Sorata didn't have anything to occupy himself with. Slowly but surely, Sorata's head started to be dominated by thoughts of Mashiro.

But he had other things on his mind as well- Jin's external exams. What would happen to Misaki. And he still wasn't able to sort out that fight that he had with Nanami yet.

Nanami was currently busy going to her part time jobs everyday while taking care of Mashiro as well as immersing herself into practicing for her academy presentation. Sorata didn't have the chance to sit down and talk to her properly yet.

At that moment, someone called out to him behind his back.

"Sorata."

Being surprised, Sorata lost his balance and fell backwards along with his chair. Trying to resist the pain, he opened his eyes. The upside-down Mashiro entered his view.

He quickly got himself up.

When he did, he remembered an important promise that he made. Today was the 20th of August. It was the day when Mashiro's one shot was getting released. He had promised Mashiro to go to a bookshop together.

"Should we go to the bookshop when you've finished studying?"

Surprisingly, Mashiro shook her head. She didn't even try to come in to his room.

"Nanami is strange."

"Strange? How do you mean?"

Mashiro wordlessly looked towards the end of the hallway… towards the front door.

Was someone there?

When Sorata looked outside his room, he saw Nanami at the front door in her casual

clothing.

She was leaning against the shoe rack with her head bowed, but wasn't moving.

Something wasn't right for sure. He couldn't feel Nanami's usual cheerfulness from her.

Coming out to the hallway, he ran towards Nanami. Mashiro followed him from behind.

"Aoyama?"

When he spoke to her, Nanami slowly raised her head. Her eyes were out of focus and she had flushed cheeks. But she was wrapping herself as if she was feeling cold.

"You…"

"I'm… fine. It's nothing."

Her voice was different from normal as well. Her energetic voice was nowhere to be heard.

"What do you mean you're fine."

He placed his hand on Nanami's forehead. The heat from her forehead was transmitted to him through his palm.

She had a fever. And it was quite high as well…

"I told you I'm fine."

Nanami didn't put in any force when she tried to break free from Sorata and when she moved, she coughed painfully a few times. He rubbed Nanami's back to aid her.

"Kanda… this is sexual harassment…"

"Now isn't the time for that."

"I'm fine now… I need to go to my job… sorry about the study session, I need to go…"

What she said didn't make too much sense. That was more than enough proof to show

that her brain wasn't functioning properly because of the fever.

"Don't mind about the study. And going to your job now is too much, stay home."

"If I suddenly don't work… it'll be a bother to the other workers…."

"It's also going to be a bother when there's a worker that's unable to work properly!"

Sorata sternly cut her off. Nanami wasn't in a state where she could go outside. In fact, Sorata wasn't even sure if she would be able to reach her workplace safely.

"But…"

If she didn't rest, it looked like she was about to collapse.

"Don't worry about it and rest. Tomorrow is an important day for you right?"

Tomorrow, on the 21st of August, Nanami had an important performance at her academy.

"Th… at's true, but…"

"Anyway, go up to your room and sleep. Do it for tomorrow's sake. What's the number for your workplace? I'll contact them for you."

"No… I'll do it…"

Nanami's breaths were hot. It looked like it was hard to even keep her eyes open. Even so, Nanami picked up the phone near the entrance.

She pressed down on the numbers one by one.

That's right. Nanami's phone got disconnected last month.

Since she was spending all of her money to pay back for the dorm fees, she didn't have any money left to spend on anything else. Before, Nanami had said that she'll make do without one somehow. But Sorata didn't really believe that…

"This is Aoyama. Yes, thanks for your hard work. …. Yes, I'm sorry. I'm not feeling too well and I have a fever… yes, yes. Thank you. …. Yes, I'm really sorry. Then…"

Nanami coughed again when she hung up the phone and she collapsed onto the floor. It

looked like she didn't have the strength to get back up.

Sorata wordlessly picked up Nanami put her behind his back.

Her hot breaths could be felt on his neck. That fanned his nervousness even further. Not wanting to lose to his nervousness, Sorata put strength into his legs and walked upstairs and carried Nanami to her room.

Nanami didn't resist until Sorata let her down on to her bed.

"I'll go and get some medicine."

As he tried to go downstairs, Nanami grabbed Sorata's wrists. Sweat marked the place of contact and Nanami's heat was transferred to Sorata's wrist.

"What's wrong? Do you have anything that you want?"

"I'll go… tomorrow… "

Nanami mumbled out to herself.

"I'll go…"

It looked like even Nanami didn't know what she was saying.

"I got it, I got it."

The grip on Sorata's wrist loosened. When he slipped out from her grip, Nanami feel asleep as if she was knocked out.

Nanami's harsh breathing told Sorata that things won't get better by tomorrow. Sorata wanted to block his ears as he came out of the room.

He returned to his room to get changed and ran out from the dorm in order to get some medicine.

Machida Clinic was a private hospital that was near the shopping district and when he was younger, he would often be dragged to the clinic by his mother whenever he got sick.

Sorata knew the old doctor who looked the same as he was 10 years ago quite well. So when Sorata came running into the clinic, the doctor didn't seem to mind at all and listened to what Sorata had to say carefully.

He even agreed to come and visit Sakurasou in the afternoon.

After about an hour, the doctor came to take a look at Nanami and came in to Sorata's room when he was finished to give his opinions.

It was a summer cold caused by overworking and weak immune system. Sorata didn't explain a lot to the doctor, but he seemed to know about Nanami's condition exactly. The doctor said that Nanami had to rest for a few days even if she was a young and energetic.

Her recovery by tomorrow shouldn't even be considered.

The old doctor warned him that Nanami shouldn't force herself once more and went back to the clinic, leaving behind some antibiotics and vitamins.

Chihiro was out because she went to school early this morning. Jin was also out because he had been sleeping over at other girls' houses since last night. Sorata already told Misaki about Nanami's condition after lunch.

When Jin came back in that evening, Sorata gathered everyone to his room. Sorata, Jin, Misaki and Mashiro were in the room.

Sorata started by explaining about Nanami's situation to Jin first.

"I expected her to get sick soon, but for that to happen now."

If you expected her to get sick… Sorata wanted to say that to Jin, but he held back. There was no point to say that now, and Sorata did sort of know that she would collapse soon but he wasn't able to do anything.

"Tomorrow is the problem~"

Misaki bit down on her lips and crossed her arms in thought. Everyone here knew that there was a presentation at the academy. They were able to feel the pressure of it over the last few days as well. Sometimes, they were able to hear Nanami practicing from the second floor.

“She was even sleep talking, saying that she will go tomorrow.”

Taking a break from her part time job was nothing in comparison. A normal lesson also couldn’t be compared either. Tomorrow was a special day that came only once a year for Nanami. It was a day when Nanami would be able to show off her talents and hard work. Nanami has been working hard for that day.

“But we can’t let her go.”

Jin put on a complicated expression.

“Yeah, I took a slight peek earlier, but Nanamin seemed to be in a lot of pain, so even though it’s unfortunate, I don’t think she can go tomorrow.”

“If she says that she wants to go, we need to stop her.”

“You’re right.”

Even though it was very unfortunate, Sorata could only agree with Jin. It was too late for them to do anything. They had to persuade Nanami to give up for her sake.

Jin got up saying that it was decided.

When he did, Mashiro who had been quiet all this time opened her mouth.

“If it was me, I would go.”

Sorata and Misaki’s eyes turned towards Mashiro and Jin who was about to leave the room stoped.

“If it was me, I would go.”

“But Shiina.”

“If Nanami wants to go, then let her go.”

Being at loss on what to say, Sorata looked towards Jin for some help. Jin only shrugged to say that he couldn’t stop her.

“Let Nanami go, please.”

Mashiro was requesting them, but her eyes said that she would drag Nanami herself if

otherwise.

“Please.”

Mashiro bowed her head to the others.

“That’s what she says, but what should we do~ Sorata?”

“I want to let Aoyama do whatever she wants to do, but…”

The memory of Nanami’s hot hand grabbing onto Sorata’s wrist wouldn’t leave his head. That voice and the determination… he wanted Nanami’s efforts to be rewarded.

“Please Sorata. Nanami did her best… until late every night.”

“I know that, but…”

Sometimes, one had to do things in moderation.

“Please.”

“If common sense is holding you back, shouldn’t you already know the answer to it?”

It was Jin who said that to the troubled Sorata. He had a face that said that he’s given up and gave out the conclusion.

“Where do you think we are?”

They were in the den of troubled kids. It was Sakurasou where they defied all logic and common sense.

Mashiro blankly stared. Sorata’s heart started to waver. Should he let her go or should he stop her. Which one was right for Nanami? However thinking about it was pointless, because in the end, it wasn’t going to be Sorata who makes the decision, but Nanami.

“Alright. If Nanami says that she’s going to go, then we can’t stop her.”

Nanami wouldn’t give up on her own. Even though he knew it, Sorata could only say that.

“Al~right, then it’s decided! Let’s all help Nanami~!”

Misaki replied to herself saying yep.

“Thanks Sorata.”

“It’s nothing… I’ll follow her tomorrow. It would be dangerous for Aoyama to go by herself in that state.”

“Then I’ll take care of the transportation~”

“Ah, I see. A taxi might be better. Then we can rely on your finances senpai.”

“You can be at ea~se like as if you’re on a spaceship!”

Misaki smiled brightly. It did look like she was planning something, but Sorata decided not to dig far into it, since he thought that it wouldn’t be something that was negative for Nanami.

“It’s only Chihiro left huh. Thinking about it logically, I guess she might refuse.”

Jin straightened up his glasses.

“I don’t think of her to be a responsible adult though…”

“Well, I’ll take care of her somehow.”

“We’ll be relying on you.”

Sorata really didn’t know how to deal with Chihiro. For this part, it would be better if Jin handled it, since he had more life experience and skills. Looking at Jin, it looked like he understood what he had to do perfectly.

“What about me?”

Mashiro suddenly asked.

“It would be the best if Shiina didn’t do anything.”

If she joined in, then it would make the problem larger.

“I want to help as well.”

Was it just Sorata who thought that Mashiro looked slightly disappointed?

“Then you can tag along with Sorata, Mashiron.”

“Wait senpai!”

“Transportation by Misaki and I’ll stop Chihiro. Any complaints?”

“Nope!”

Misaki enthusiastically nodded her head.

“What, I thought no-one was home. What are you guys planning now?”

The one who suddenly appeared was Chihiro who just returned from school. She returned earlier than usual because she was notified that Nanami was ill with a cold by her phone.

“Suzune called me out, so I’ll be off now.”

Jin quickly got up and left the room.

Misaki followed suit, saying

“I should finish my lay-out~.”

And left the room.

Using the disturbance, Mashiro also tried to sneak out of the room. Seeing her trying to leave, Chihiro stopped her.

“Mashiro, this came in the mail for you.”

Chihiro took out a large package that was quite big. On the cover, it had the logo of the shoujo manga [26].

“It’s the preview copy right?” Chihiro urged at Mashiro to take it, and she wordlessly reached out for it. Without taking off the tape, she took out the magazine from the envelope.

Mashiro wasn’t happy, smiling or emotional as she flipped through the pages. Noticing her manga in the middle of the magazine, she just looked at the opening page

and closed it.

She handed the magazine out to Sorata.

“Did you finish reading it?”

“I already know the contents.”

“Well, that’s true… but aren’t you happy… or something?”

“I’m very happy.”

“You sure don’t look happy… anyways, congratulations on your debut.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

She really didn’t look happy. It might be because she was worried about Nanami.

Sorata glanced at the magazine in his hands. In the left hand corner, there was a short introduction in small fonts for a new one-shot. Beneath the title was the name 「Mashiro Shiina」.

His hands were shaking as he flipped the pages to reach Mashiro’s manga. Since he knew where it was, he was able to find it reasonably quickly.

It was really on there. That was the first and the most obvious thing that came to his mind first. He read it page by page. He read it before, but reading it from a magazine felt completely different and it felt like it was the real deal.

“So being a mangaka is possible.”

That was his honest expression- he was amazed.

He gave the preview copy back to Mashiro. Mashiro hugged it and returned back to her room.

Chihiro who was still in the room looked at Sorata with snake like eyes.

“So? You guys aren’t thinking of doing anything stupid are you?”

Their teacher was surprisingly sharp when it came to these things.

“We’re not. And please get out of my room and close the door. I have my own privacy that needs to be respected!”

“You don’t have any of that.”

Chihiro spoke out the fearsome words and left the room.

He had to close the open door himself.

But the real deal started from now.

Even though he knew that it was pointless, he could only pray.

That Nanami would get better by tomorrow.

Part 2

The next day, Sorata's prayer didn't work and Nanami still wasn't able to regain her health.

Nanami came downstairs, fully prepared to go outside. She was already changed and she had her large back that she always brought when she went to the academy on her shoulders.

Seeing her, Chihiro obviously stopped her.

"Aoyama, go back to your room."

"Why…?"

Nanami's voice was gone, and she wasn't able to speak properly.

Her voice was a lot worse than yesterday. Her blocked nose affected her voice significantly.

"Don't ask for reasons when they're so obvious."

Even against Chihiro, Nanami didn't try to back down. She was being really stubborn about it. Even she knew that backing down will spell out the end for her.

Nanami should know better than anyone else about her own health. If there wasn't anything important scheduled for today, she would have wanted to rest. However, she had to go today, to show off her efforts and hours of practice.

"Just go back to your room and sleep."

"I don't want to."

"Your opinion doesn't really matter."

Chihiro tried to grab Nanami's arm.

But before she was able to, Jin poked his hand under Chihiro's armpits.

“What the hell Mitaka! What do you think you’re doing!”

“Sorata, I leave the rest to you.”

Instead of replying, Sorata picked up the bag and lead Nanami towards the front door.

“You might be reluctant about it, but I’m dropping you off.”

Nanami tried to complain, but she stopped herself and just nodded her head once.

“So this was why you guys gathered in Sorata’s room!”

Chihiro struggled in midair thanks to Jin’s help.

“W, wait! Mitaka~! Why are you groping my breasts!”

“Because they’re just there.”

“Don’t talk like it’s just a coincidence!”

Hearing Chihiro’s screams behind his back, Sorata brought Nanami out of the dorm.

As they did, a white minivan rolled in. it was a sparkling new van.

“Kohai-kun! Hop on!”

Misaki was in the driver’s seat.

“Huh? Senpai, what’s going on?!”

He did leave the transportation to Misaki.

But he was expecting her to prepare a taxi or something.

Why was Misaki gripping onto the steering wheel?

Without understanding what was going on, Sorata and Nanami got in the back seats. Mashiro must’ve silently come in, because she was already in the passenger seat next to the driver’s seat.

When the doors closed, Misaki started up the care. Chihiro who had broken free from Jin chased them, but the distance quickly widened and when they turned a corner, she

was nowhere to be seen.

“Uh… senpai, what about your license?”

“I’ve already got one.”

“When?”

“Hm~, suddenly.”

“Explain properly!”

Sorata felt extremely unsafe being in the van. For now, they were travelling within the speed limits. It looked like they were following the path set out by the navigation system, but it was the alien Misaki who was behind the wheels. It was impossible not to feel worried.

“Hm~, so~, ah it was then. That gloomy time in June when kohai-kun had a quarrel with Mashiron and you it looked like you just got dumped.”

It was unfortunate that Misaki named that period as the gloomy time in June, but Sorata certainly didn’t have any time to worry about what was going on in his surroundings.

He couldn’t really say that he knew about Misaki getting a drivers license.

“Then… this van is just a rental?”

“I bought it.”

“For how much?”

“I think I paid the full amount in cash for 3,000,000 yen[27] or something… I’m not too sure. I left all that to Jin.”

“I see. Never mind then.”

According to the Japanese law, people were allowed to obtain their driving licenses when they were 18 and over. Misaki did celebrate her 18th birthday in June.

Nanami was probably still tired because she had her eyes closed and wasn’t moving.

It might be that she was trying to minimise energy loss.

It might be that she was resting her body to get even a little bit better.

Thinking like that, Sorata naturally closed his mouth and decided not to bother Nanami at this stage.

Their van continued to smoothly travel along the roads.

After driving for nearly an hour, they became lost in the forest of buildings inside the city and Misaki started to look around.

"Don't tell me that we're lost?"

"No~ it's near here somewhere~!"

To support her claim, the navigation told them「You're close to your destination」.

"Aoyama, I think we're here."

Nanami slowly opened her eyes.

She must've been sleeping quite deeply because she had a dazed face as she got up. Nevertheless, her eyes were lit up with her resolve. They were the eyes of someone who was determined to do their job. Even at her current state, Nanami's will was still there.

"Is here ok?"

"… Yeah, I'll be fine by myself from now on."

Nanami opened the door and went out of the van. Her legs were shaking as she walked, but Sorata couldn't help her from now on even if he wanted to. It was Nanami who had to perform and not Sorata.

So they said their good bye from the van.

He couldn't say 'Do your best'. He wasn't able to. If possible he wanted Nanami to take it easy. He really wanted Nanami to rest in the bed and recover.

Nanami crossed the road at the crossing lights and walked about 10 meters before entering a 5 story building.

“Ah, so the lesson studio was here~.”

It looked like any other buildings with a convenience store and a residential building near-by.

“I’ll park the van in the parking lot on the other side.”

Misaki turned on the sidelights and drove the van towards the parking lot.

She skilfully parked the van in the spot.

Inside the van was really silent.

“How long does it take?”

The one who broke the silence was Mashiro. It was the first time she spoke ever since getting into the van.

“She said that a normal lesson is usually 3 hours, but I’m not sure about today. If it would finish earlier or later… I don’t know.”

“I see.”

It was going to be hard spending 3 hours in the van like this. The silence was suffocating. But they weren’t in the mood to tell jokes to lift the mood.

“Shiina, should we go to the bookstore?”

“No.”

“Don’t you want to see your manga on the shelves?”

“It’s ok.”

“… What’s ok?”

“Because it will be continuously published.”

If it was Mashiro she should do well. If she got serialised, then her manga will be

published monthly. Mashiro was able to confidently declare that.

Even if she failed, she would push on forwards. That was how amazing Mashiro was.

“I see.”

“Yep.”

However, Mashiro was slightly different than normal. She was usually confident, but today, she was crouching down onto her seat.

“Hey, Sorata.”

“What?”

“Was it because of me?”

“Huh?”

“Nanami getting tired.”

“It’s not.”

Sorata didn’t have any evidence, but he denied it.

It was Nanami who chose to burry herself with the Mashiro duty, part time jobs and the academy. Nanami wouldn’t think of it to be Mashiro’s fault, but her own for over loading herself and got ill at an unlucky timing.

“I need to apologise.”

“But she’ll get angry at you.”

Even if Nanami did feel that Mashiro was the cause, she wouldn’t be concerned about it. No-one wanted to get hurt because of a misunderstanding like that because it would be pointless.

With that, the silence returned once more.

After waiting around for about 2 hours, people started to come out from the academy building. There were around 30 people and Nanami came out last.

Noticing her, Sorata quickly got out of the van and went towards her. However, he stopped as he was about to reach her.

Nanami was talking to someone. No, she was listening to a girl who looked around the same age as her.

Sorata wasn't able to hear what she was saying, but he knew that the girl was telling Nanami off. Seeing Nanami apologize numerous times to the other girl, Sorata couldn't watch them for any longer and rushed to them.

"Aoyama, let's go."

The girl who had been speaking to Nanami turned around to Sorata with an angry expression. Nanami's expression darkened.

"Who are you? Nanami's boyfriend?"

Her voice was particularly sweet. She had long eyelashes and a small doll like face. She had a mysterious and a bright atmosphere around her. However since she was being quite cold towards Sorata, there were no traces of cuteness that could be found on her.

"I came here to pick up Aoyama, but I'm not her boyfriend."

"How lucky for you."

She said that to Nanami.

"I'm sorry, but if you have anything to say, then why don't you say it next time? Aoyama isn't feeling too well today."

"I know that but where's the guaranty that next time will come?"

"I'm sorry... I'm really sorry Momoko…"

"Why, it was Nanami who was at fault, but… why!"

The girl who was called Momoko turned around and ran away, her twin tails swaying as she ran.

"I'm sorry Kanda…"

“Don’t mind me, let’s go.”

He brought Nanami to the parked van.

Sorata hopped on after seating Nanami in the back seat.

“Then let’s go~!”

Misaki acted energetically, but inside the van was very gloomy.

Nanami’s condition was visibly worse most likely because the medicine that she took wore off.

Or maybe it was because she stopped trying to hide that she was sick.

The coarse breathing circled around Sorata’s ears. Every now and then, Nanami coughed and hunched down.

Her body felt heavy because of the fever. Her throat was hurting and it was painful having her nose blocked. However, Sorata knew that Nanami’s conditions worsened not because of the said above, but because the performance didn’t go the way that she wanted…

He didn’t have anything to say to her.

Misaki concentrated on her driving, and Mashiro only looked forwards. Sorata could only look outside the window hoping that they would arrive at Sakurasou soon.

As they were doing their own thing, Nanami broke the long silence.

She said it with a very small voice in her home dialect.

“… Sorry.”

“Sleep until you get to Sakurasou.”

Sorata thought that it might be better not to reply to her properly. It was because he didn’t know what to say in this situation.

“Sorry for making everyone go through all this… because of me.”

Nanami continued to talk. It was like she forgot how to speak in a non-dialect speech

and each time she spoke with her coarse voice, Sorata's heart was throbbing. Usually, Nanami would speak in a clear and precise voice. But now that she lost the most important part about her, she lost her confidence and looked weak like any other people.

"Don't mind it, its fine."

"What do you mean its fine… everyone was troubled because of me…"

"I told you its fine."

"Even you said it Kanda… that I shouldn't work too hard, it was reckless… and don't be so stubborn…"

Nothing could get through to Nanami if she was swept up by her emotions like this. She wouldn't listen to Sorata.

"I was too arrogant, thinking that I can do it all... I screwed up. Everyone helped me so much… but I wasn't able to do anything…"

"Aoyama…"

"My body won't listen to me; my voice isn't coming out properly… I got told off by my teacher for not being able to take care of myself… and I had no excuse… I only troubled the guys at the academy, because of me Momoko as well… I'm really an idiot…"

Her regret stomped down on Nanami. Her feelings of not being able to show off her full skills, emptiness that she felt for not having her efforts paid off. The feelings of pity for letting that day go away. All those feelings accumulated into a big ball of regret and sorrow, pressing down on Nanami.

"I've been preparing for this day… I blew that chance, so what was the point… I didn't work hard for this… I didn't… I, I thought I might be able to do better… but… I really feel like an idiot… how can I be so foolish…"

It was painful to see Nanami blaming herself. Sorata was only listening to her, but he was able to feel her emotions through her words and body language.

Nanami was just punishing herself. Because she didn't know any other ways to forgive herself…

But that was too sad. Sorata didn't want to hear that Nanami's efforts were useless.

"It's alright Aoyama. Even if you ignore me."

"What are you saying! Telling me don't do this… don't say that. Just call me an idiot and laugh at me... otherwise, I'm… going to die from the shame."

"Don't say it like that. Don't even think of it that way. If you're an idiot, then everyone on earth would be idiots as well. That's ridiculous!"

"… Kanda."

He knew about Nanami who was strict on others while being stricter on herself. Her school grades were outstanding, she was well trusted by her teachers while paying for her tuition fees and her living cost via her part time jobs… Sorata has never seen a person like her before who was in the same age group. A model student. That was who Nanami Aoyama was.

But now, Sorata thought that it wasn't true after all.

Since Nanami had her own set of tips and tricks for doing anything, she was doing things better than the average. However, that must be a pressure for her sometimes. So Sorata thought that this was why Nanami was always so determined to do things better than the average.

There aren't that many people who are able to do everything while being lazy.

Nanami had to fool herself into doing her best, so that she's able to do what she wants to do and not be a bother to anyone.

Jin has said something to Sorata before. He said that Nanami was different to Sorata and this was probably what Jin meant back then.

Nanami had always been fighting something over the last year and a half, even since she came up from Osaka despite her parents' disagreement. She had been keeping all of her feelings to herself, hiding it from anyone else… She knew that she wouldn't be able to do her best if she acknowledged that her life was impossible. If she allowed herself to get soft and weak, she knew that she wouldn't be able to pick herself back up. She couldn't rely on anyone else but herself, otherwise people might notice her faults…

But she wasn't able to last and today, Nanami finally accepted defeat.

"You've done your best Aoyama, we know that better than anyone else."

"Wh… why are you saying that. If you say that, then I… I want to… hear that… even more…"

Nanami cried and tear drops continued to fall.

Nanami wanted to say a lot more, but her voice just wouldn't come out. Nanami sniffed over and over again.

Sorata looked straight at front so that he wasn't seeing Nanami's messed up crying face. The van continued to drive. Neither Misaki nor Mashiro said anything.

Nanami who was still trying to stop crying placed her hot hand on Sorata's. He was surprised for a moment, but he somehow knew what he had to do. Sorata flipped his hand and held onto Nanami's hand. To cheer on for her and to say that it was ok and that she's done her best.

Like a small child, Nanami wept and clung onto Sorata's hand. While wiping away her tears with her other hand…

Sorata continued to listen to Nanami desperately trying to stop crying until they reached Sakurasou.

Part 3

When the van that Misaki was driving arrived at Sakurasou, Nanami was leaning on Sorata's shoulders and was asleep. Sorata picked her up and laid her in her bed upstairs without waking her up.

For the clothes, he begged Chihiro who was waiting for them with a stern face to get Nanami changed.

Afterwards, Sorata, Jin, Misaki and Mashiro had to sit down at the kitchen table and listen to Chihiro's lecture. The lecture itself was done in a slack manner, which reconfirmed how much of a lazy person their teacher who was in charge of Sakurasou was. Half way through the lecture, her topic started to change, saying that she wasn't getting a lot of meetings these days or how her juniors were starting to get married; which left Sorata wanting to say 'What on earth are you saying now', but nevertheless, to show that he was remorseful about it, he kept quiet.

It was something that they found out afterwards, but apparently, it was Jin who had to take on the full lecture in Sorata's gang's place while they were out. Thanks to that, all they listened to were rants on Chihiro's life. Jin left saying that Rumi, an office worker, was waiting for him at her apartment when Chihiro's lecture finished.

Nanami didn't open her eyes even once during the night when Sorata kept checking back on her every hour. Mashiro sat next to the bed, and wouldn't leave Nanami's side even if Sorata said anything.

Mashiro must've been feeling somewhat responsible for Nanami's fever.

"Shiina, you should rest. It's already past midnight."

"It's ok. I'll stay here."

"But if you get sick, Aoyama will feel guilty again."

"I'm fine."

"… Alright then. Then I'll leave Aoyama to you. Let me know when she wakes up."

“Yeah.”

The next morning, Sorata woke up feeling the heat from Hikari’s butt on his face.

“What a bad way to wake up.”

He got up and came out of his room to go to the bathroom. He washed his face and brushed his hair. Afterwards, the seven cats that were demanding for food and their owner went down to the kitchen together.

Inside the kitchen, Jin was keeping an eye on a small pot on the stove. He was dressed the same way as the previous night. He must’ve come back just now.

Noticing Sorata, Jin greeted him.

Sorata looked at the boiling pot while feeding the cats.

“What’s that?”

Jin opened the pot lid. The puff of steam came up; blocking the view and the delicious aroma of bonito stock could be smelt.

The content was just a simple porridge.

“We should feed her something right?”

Saying that, Jin looked up at the second floor and turned off the stove. He placed the pot, spoon and a small bowl of pickled plums on a wooden board and gave it to Sorata.

“Feed her this. I’m going to sleep now.”

Jin let out a yawn while disappearing to his room.

Sorata didn’t have the chance to stop him.

Sorata couldn’t really push the duty onto others either. Unfortunately, it was only Sorata and the cats in the kitchen.

Holding the board carefully, Sorata climbed up the stairs.

When he arrived in front of Nanami's door, he noticed that it was slightly opened. Mashiro probably forgot to close the door.

Through the gap, a voice came out.

"What should I do… Torajiro." [28]

It was Nanami's voice.

Who was she talking to? Nanami's phone had been disconnected. So it was impossible for her to be on the phone. Who on earth was Torajiro?

"「How would I know? You should clean up your mess by yourself.」" [29]

The other person seemed to use a Kansai dialect as well.

But it felt like the other voice was Nanami as well. The other person was speaking in a boyish tone, but it might've been because of Nanami's blocked nose.

"Even so, what happened yesterday was too embarrassing."

"「That's nothing. What's even more embarrassing is having overdue dorm fees. Why are you saying that now.」"

Just what was going on.

Being curious, Sorata peeked inside the room through the open door.

"But I cried and showed my unattractive side of myself to Kanda, and I can't even remember what happened afterwards. Did he see my sleeping face? Ah~ I think I'm going to go crazy…"

"「So why did you sleep so defencelessly? He's not too much different from you, you know?」"

Nanami was sitting on the bed. She was wearing her pyjamas. The person she was talking to wasn't visible. All that was seen was just Mashiro sleeping on the floor.

"W, what are you saying!"

"「Stop being so scared of it and just jump on him.」"

The one Nanami was facing was a tiger shaped cushion.

“So that’s Torajiro…”

Sorata muttered out one of his usual phrases.

“Huh? W, who’s there?!”

“Ah~, uh, Aoyama, you awake?”

“Yeah…”

“It’s me, Kanda. Do you mind if I come in?”

“I, I don’t… mind.”

Sorata walked in, trying to make as little sound as possible and went near the bed.

Nanami glanced at Sorata with her face half buried into her tiger shaped cushion.

“… Did you hear all that just now?”

“I never expected a cushion to have a reply back feature.”

Nanami buried her face into the cushion fully. Her ears and neck became bright red.

She looked sideways to Sorata and demanded a promise from him.

“Don’t tell anyone.”

Sorata could only nod obediently. Torajiro was also looking at him. It looked like this wasn’t the first time for Nanami to talk to a cushion.

To change the topic, Sorata extended the food that he’d brought.

“Can you eat?”

Looking at Nanami, she looked a lot better than the day before.

“Yeah. Actually… I’m quite hungry.”

She hasn’t eaten for the last two days. It was obvious that she was feeling hungry.

“Did you make it?”

“No, it was Jin-senpai.”

“Where did Mitaka-senpai go?”

“He gave this to me after cooking it and went to his room to sleep.”

Sorata handed over the small pot that had the porridge inside. But for some reason, Nanami put on a bitter smile and didn’t take the bowl.

“Ah, I really want to eat it, but…”

Sorata followed Nanami’s gaze and saw that Mashiro had both of her hand around Nanami’s right hand.

“She must’ve been holding onto me all night.”

Nanami probably felt shy, because her words trailed off while keeping her head bowed. Or, she could’ve been happy.

“I don’t know what Shiina is thinking, but she said that she feels responsible for you and she was worried about you.”

“She didn’t need to.”

“Also, it was Shiina who knew you better than anyone else.”

“How do you mean?”

“If Shiina didn’t say anything, I would’ve stopped you.”

“Me going to the academy?”

“That’s right. Of course I would when you have such a high fever. But Shiina said that if it was her, she would go for sure and said that she wanted to drag you there if possible. She requested it to me, Misaki-senpai and Jin-senpai. Since she knew how much you have worked for it…”

“I… see.”

“So that was why I decided to change my view and fully support you.”

“Then I guess I should thank her. I screwed up my performance completely, but I was glad that I went. If I didn’t go, I would’ve regretted it even more.”

“I see.”

“Yeah… Shiina really is amazing. She is almost blinding. She tries a lot harder than me…”

Nanami clenched her teeth in frustration. She was feeling distressed because she knew that she was nowhere near Mashiro’s skills.

“She’s always drawing her manga late into the night… she probably can’t hear me when I tell her to sleep…”

“I told you already. When she’s concentrating, she ignores everything.”

“I’ve seen her fixing her mistakes over and over again. I could tell that things weren’t going so smoothly for her, but Shiina wouldn’t give up.”

“I know.”

“Sometimes, she was still there at the table when I went to wake her up in the morning. With a determined face that said that she was going to finish it as soon as possible. I was quite surprised at that. I’ve always thought that talented people didn’t put any effort in for anything, because they were geniuses. But that was before I met Shiina.”

“I feel the same way.”

“Then what should we do to catch up to those talented people?”

At her question, Sorata could only become silent. But he thought that it was enough. Nanami wasn’t expecting a response from him anyway. She wanted to find out the answer to that question by herself.

“I must be on my nerves…. I know that catching up to Shiina isn’t so simple.”

Nanami patted Mashiro’s head with her free hand. Then Mashiro let out a kitten like sound and let go of her hand. Nanami looked at her right hand that has been finally freed after a few hours. Her face had a relieved look.

“Seeing you worrying about me feels like I’m responsible.”

At Nanami’s words, Sorata felt relieved. It didn’t feel like Nanami really was a part of the Sakurasou family, but now it really did feel like Nanami was a part of the group.

Nanami took the wooden plate into her hands.

After saying itadakimasu[30], she scooped up some porridge to her mouth.

With her mouth open, Nanami glanced at Sorata.

“Don’t stare at me while I’m eating.”

“S, sorry.”

Sorata quickly looked away to face somewhere else in the room.

“Don’t look around the room either.”

So Sorata could only look down and watch Mashiro sleeping on the floor.

“You can’t be looking at Shiina’s sleeping face either.”

He was at lost on what to do. Nanami was still Nanami even when she was weak. This was good. It was great to see her take control.

“Are you telling me to get out?”

“I didn’t say that, but I would like it if you stayed a bit further away from me.”

“You’re hurting me…”

He moved away from the bed and sat on a chair near the table.

“Because… I haven’t even showered yet…”

“Hmm? Did you say something?”

“The porridge is quite good.”

“I’m glad it suits your taste. Jin-senpai is good at cooking. If you’re appetite is

growing, then you must be feeling better. Eat a lot."

Nanami narrowed her eyes and glared at Sorata.

"If I eat a lot, I'll get fat."

Even after she said that, Nanami continued to eat the porridge. She must've been really hungry.

The pot that had the porridge inside became empty fairly quickly. While Nanami was taking her medicine after eating, Sorata placed the wooden plate on the table.

When he did, Nanami spoke to him from behind.

"… Sorry."

"Why so suddenly?"

"I was a bother yesterday… I made Kamiigusa-senpai to drive around for me and Mitaka-senpai had to stop the teacher…. Everyone helped me so much, but it ended up like this…."

"I'm not sure about Misaki-senpai or Jin-senpai, but I don't act to receive thanks from you. Yesterday was the same as well."

"… Does that mean that you won't forgive me?"

Looking worried, Nanami asked.

"No, I'm not talking about forgiveness, but how should I say it- I never thought of it that way I guess…"

"I'm not following you."

"I think it's like this. I mean, it's cool to take care of things one by one by yourself and that's a way of maturing. But I think people are good or bad at certain things, while being free or being very busy most of the time and accepting that is how Sakurasou operates. So I think you should find your own place in the system to contribute what you're good at."

"…."

Nanami just stared at Sorata without saying anything else.

“You can always lean on us because we’re here for you. If you can’t do that, then I’ll be really upset.”

“… Yeah.”

“I think it’s good to be like that.”

“Kanda.”

“What is it?”

“Isn’t it embarrassing to say that? I want to hide in a hole after listening to that.”

“Keep your comments to yourself!”

Sorata turned his blushing face away. He looked outside the window for no purpose and tried to regain his composure. To Sorata who was doing that, Nanami suddenly attacked his back.

“Thank you.”

Surprised, he looked behind him to see Nanami who had her head bowed onto his back. He was speechless at the rare scene.

“I said thank you. Don’t make me say it twice.”

“Y, yeah.”

“Why”

“Aoyama, were you like this before?”

“Saying things like that…I don’t like that side about you.”

Slightly pouting, Nanami pretended to look upset. At her unexpected cuteness, Sorata was stunned.

“N, no, yeah… it’s alright!”

Thanks to him making a loud noise trying to calm himself down, he woke Mashiro up.

Opening her eyes by only 20%, Mashiro looked around her.

“Huh, Nanami?”

“Did you sleep well? Shiina?”

“Are you ok now?”

“Yeah… I still have some temperature, but I’m a lot better now.”

“I see, that’s good.”

“It’s all thanks to you Shiina.”

With an effort, Nanami turned her body towards Sorata. Her eyes said that she wanted to say something.

“I’ve got something to discuss with you Kanda.”

“Hmm?”

Nanami peeked at Mashiro. Just by her action, Sorata knew what she was going to say next.

“It’s about「Mashiro Duty」…. Sorry, but I think it’ll be impossible for me to do it for any longer. Semester two starts in September, and with school, part time jobs and academy going on… I don’t think I can handle the duty on top of it all.”

“Ok, I’ll do it. We’ll swap it at the Sakurasou meeting today.”

“Yeah…”

It couldn’t be helped in this situation. But at the moment when Sorata accepted the duty, he was reminded of something that he wanted to forget.

It was that letter. He still wasn’t able to come to terms with it.

He would consistently be bothered by it whenever he saw Mashiro.

“W, well, I don’t mind doing it, but there’s a…”

“Don’t worry about it. I already took care of it.”

“Huh?”

Nanami gave him a wink in reply, but Sorata couldn’t figure out the meaning behind it.

In front of puzzled Sorata, Nanami looked at Mashiro.

“Hey Shiina?”

“What is it?”

“It’s about that person who sent you that letter from England.”

“Adel.”

“Yup, so what relationship do you have with that Adel person?”

“Wait!”

Sorata tried to stop her, but it was too late.

“He’s my art teacher.”

Nanami continued to ask.

“And his age?”

“Seventy.”

“What?”

A shocked noise came out Sorata’s mouth.

Nanami playfully laughed. She probably knew about it from before.

“So she says. Problem solved?”

“W, why are you asking me that?”

“Well, I wonder why. With this, my debt is paid off.”

“You’re not indebted to me… that’s not it, how did you know?”

He asked at Nanami and glanced at Mashiro who was looking at him with a strange expression.

“Every morning study session, I noticed that you were acting funny whenever you saw Mashiro’s face, so~ I wondered what it was. Judging by the timing, I figured as much.”

“Are you a detective!”

“Seeing your reaction, it must’ve been correct.”

“No, no! It’s not like that!”

Sorata realised that he just admitted it by his over-reaction quickly tried to justify himself.

“It’s not like I was interested in it.”

He felt like Nanami was seeing through him completely. He was angry at that, but since it meant that Nanami was feeling better, he decided to think good of it.

“It’s nothing Shiina.”

“But I didn’t say anything.”

“Ah, yeah. You’re right. Never mind then. Yep, it’s all good.”

Mashiro tilted her head.

“It seems Kanda was worried about that letter.”

“Woah~! What are you saying, Aoyama!”

“Do you want to get a letter from me Kanda?”

“No!”

“Who cares, just ask for one.”

Nanami said with playful eyes.

“Ok, I’ll write you one net time.”

“Ye, yeah…”

For some reason, he felt really tired. Mashiro didn’t look like she understood what was going on, but thinking about the future, he didn’t feel particularly happy about it.

Not noticing Sorata’s worries, Mashiro yawned like a sleepy cat.

“Shiina, I’m fine now, so go back to your room and rest.”

Mashiro looked up at Nanami.

“W, what is it?”

“Mashiro.”

“Huh?”

“I want to be called that by Nanami.”

“Well that’s quite sudden…”

It was obvious for Nanami to be surprised. Since Mashiro said things randomly where it was impossible to see where her idea came from.

“But ok, I got it Mashiro. You did start calling me by my first name since some time ago after all.”

This must’ve made Mashiro happy because Mashiro tried to jump on and sleep in Nanami’s bed.

Nanami’s reaction was quite obvious.

“Go sleep in your own room!”

That day, the change in「Mashiro Duty」was confirmed at the Sakurasou meeting. The new person in charge was Sorata Kanda. The other members were worried about Nanami’s condition so they were in favour of the change.

-- 「Mashiro Duty」has been returned to Sorata Kanda from Nanami Aoyama. For other duties, please refer to the roster chart. Why does my shoulder feel heavier than

usual? Recorded by—Sorata Kanda.

-- If you try to avoid the reality, then you won't be able to wake up from your dream! Recorded by—Maid-chan who has to record the log.

-- Good luck with the duty Kanda. Sorry for this and that. There was something that I forgot to tell you so I'll write it here. If you do any weird things to Mashiro, then I'll kill you! Recorded by—Nanami Aoyama.

Part 4

Nanami's condition improved day by day and after two days, on the 24th, she resumed working at the ice cream shop. Even though Sorata was worried about her overworking, Jin said that she wasn't the type to make the same mistake twice so Sorata trusted Nanami to manage herself when she said「I'll be fine」.

When he came back to his senses after lazing around for a while, it was already the 26th. There was only a week until the end of the summer holidays. If someone asked him if he had made any good memories over the holidays, he wasn't sure on what to say.

It was a big deal applying for the game design event, but it wasn't very impactful for other people.

But if he told them how he was dragged along by Misaki who randomly yelled out that she wanted to have some takoyaki and had to go to Osaka on an 8 hours train trip or how she said that she wanted to eat ramen and they had to fly from Haneda[31] all the way to the New Chitose Airport[32] only to get a phone call from Chihiro saying

"Kanda, where are you? What? Sapporo? Then we'll have crabs for dinner. Buy some back.[33]"

And had to return on the same day after eating a bowl of ramen and buying 3 crabs, they will be shocked- so saying that was out of the question. So Sorata was only able to stay in Sapporo for around an hour. It was his first time visiting Hokkaido, but the trip ended very bitterly.

Yesterday, Misaki said that she wanted to have some noodles but fearing that he might be dragged all the way to Nagasaki[34], he politely declined. Instead, Nanami who was exhausted after coming back from work became Misaki's target and Nanami got mad at Sorata.

He wanted more normal memories. Such as going to the beach, going to the mountains or spending lovey dovey time with your girlfriend… these were the common events that normally takes place during the summer holidays.

Well, in Sakurasou's case, they were mixed sex group who were all living under the same roof and had a lot of room for certain events, but that wasn't enough.

Before dinner time, Sorata was lazing around on the table, while next to him, Mashiro was doing her names on a sketchbook. Now that he thought about it, yesterday the editor came over to Sakurasou.

According to what the editor said, she said that she came to check Mashiro's work place as well as to discuss a few things with her.

Since Mashiro mentioned her name a lot, Sorata was already familiar with the name Ayano, but it was his first time meeting her. Her full name was Ayano Iida. She was a slim woman who wore a gentle smile. She was 26 years old. For the following, Jin asked boldly to her. She was 165cm, her three sizes were 88, 59, 85 and Sorata was amazed at how Jin was able to naturally get her phone number off her.

"How does your brain work Jin-senpai?"

"I imagine them stark naked and rolling around I guess?"

It seemed like a natural Maharaja was able to get away with anything. He was worried that Jin might actually get stabbed on day.

Mashiro's names weren't apparently going well, so the meeting came to a close. The problem was that there weren't enough emotional dramas in the names. It must've been because of her own personality, because Mashiro's characters were dull and lack-lustre.

But it looked like Ayano gave her some advices and was able to guide her along. Mashiro looked lively sketching away on the sketch book next to Sorata. She kept sketching the lines and flipped the pages.

In the kitchen, Jin was preparing the dinner. He was talking to Misaki who was slumped on the table.

It was the usual Sakurasou. Sorata didn't dislike this lazy time.

Chihiro was at the school today and wasn't coming back until late at night because she went to a meeting straight afterwards.

Nanami came back from her work at the family restaurant and was resting in her room.

“Jin-senpai, what’s for dinner?”

“I’m just using some left over ingredients so it won’t be anything special.”

As they were having a pointless chatter, Nanami came into the kitchen.

At the sight of her, Sorata spat out without thinking.

“Pfft!”

Nanami who was always well dressed even in Sakurasou was in her pyjamas and was wearing glasses.

Before everyone’s surprised faces, Nanami bowed slightly to them.

“I know I’m a bit late, but I’m sorry I was a bother during the past few days.”

Nanami who had her head bowed looked embarrassed and started to look around.

“Kanda, don’t look at me too much.”

“Why are you singling me out?!”

“So you wore contacts, Aoyama.”

Jin came out from the kitchen and tried to put his arms around her naturally. Noticing what he was about to do, Nanami avoided him.

“Nanamin is so diligent~. I like Nanamin even if she wears glasses~!”

This time, Misaki ran into her arms. Nanami wasn’t able to avoid it this time and was caught in a hug.

“Senpai! S, stop it please! It’s suffocating!”

“Who cares if it’s between us girls~.”

Without stopping, Misaki buried her face into Nanami’s chest.

“N, no! There are guys here!”

“Then should we continue in the room? Or the bathroom?”

“Please stop!”

Nanami somehow escaped from Misaki, but she was out of breath. On the other hand, Misaki was still energetic. As expected from the alien. She really ran on cosmos power.

“Then should we just have a welcoming party?”

Jin looked at everyone with an expression that said that he just thought of something.

Now that he thought about it, they didn’t have a welcoming party for Nanami yet.

“Ah, I second that~! Great, as expected of Jin! Nice idea! If it’s a welcoming party, then it should be that! I have something that I’ve been preparing all this time! I’ve been waiting for Nanami’s welcoming party! So the day has finally come! The promised day!”

As usual, Misaki ran upstairs. There were stomping noises from the ceiling as she ran. And shortly afterwards, Misaki returned.

Misaki came back with a Santa sack and laid out the contents on top of the kitchen table.

From the bag came out some thirty odd swimsuits.

“We’ll have a pool welcome party!”

“Senpai, what are you saying?”

“Think about it! It’s our summer holidays, but we didn’t even go to the pool or the beach. We can’t call this dried up time as our summer holidays! Isn’t that right? Right~! Right~!”

“Ah, I… see.”

Nanami froze on the spot. Jin didn’t seem to be bothered by it while he picked up some swimsuit and started to mumble how they would go well with some girls. As usual, Mashiro didn’t show any emotion.

“Going to the swimming pool is fine, but it’s already 6 o’clock. Most of the pools will be closed by now.”

Nanami pointed out after coming back to her senses.

“There’s one at school though.”

“Huh! You want to sneak into the school??!”

“Hurry hurry. Kohai-kun and Nanamin should get ready as well!”

“I would never want to sneak in! I can’t allow you to break any rules!”

Nanami curtly rejected the idea.

“That’s right!”

Sorata agreed with her.

“The wide seas are calling me! You want to see them as well don’t you Kohai-kun! Me in swimsuits, Nanami in her swimsuit! Or Mashiron in her swimsuit!”

Well, he did want to see them.

“Don’t think dirty thoughts Kanda!”

Nanami attacked Sorata

“You’re attacking the wrong person! You’ll be swept up by Misaki-senpai’s plans.”

Nanami quickly changed her thinking.

“That’s right! We can’t use the school swimming pool,”

But this time, Jin said something.

“It’ll be alright. We’ll just get permission from the school. I’m sure they’ll let us if we ask them via Chihiro.”

“Eh? Really?”

“If we explain the reason, they’re pretty reasonable.”

“B, but, w, wait! I don’t have a swimsuit.”

“Choose whichever you like. How about this one?”

Misaki tried to put on a bikini on Nanami.

“It’s impossible! To wear one that’s so indecent!”

“Nanamin might look even better in this one!”

Misaki chose a skimpier swimsuit.

“T, this would do!”

In the end, Nanami chose one that she liked the most, a bikini, and finally accepted to go to the pool.

“Eh~, if you were such a plain one, your sexiness won’t be showed off, Nanamin! You should show off in front of Kohai-kun while you’re at it! I won’t be responsible if you regret it~.”

“Kanda and Mitaka-senpai, please get out! I, I’ll choose properly when they are out.”

She was completely swept up by Misaki’s plans.

“You should choose as well Mashiron, hurry, hurry, just choose one!”

With a bored expression, Mashiro picked up a swimsuit and said

“Sorata, pick one out for me.”

Such an outrageous thing.

“Are you trying to get me killed!”

Getting a boy to choose a swimsuit, how could he do such an embarrassing thing.

“Well then, everyone meet at the front door within 30 minutes.”

Jin waved his hand as he went out of the kitchen. Misaki looked at his back as he went out with a hopeful look on her face.

She probably wanted Jin to choose a swimsuit for her.

Wanting to discuss something with Jin, Sorata followed after him.

In front of the room's door, he was able to stop him.

"Senpai."

"Yeah?"

"You were lying when you said that we can get permission from the school weren't you? If it was a normal student, they might be able to with teacher supervision, but we're Sakurasou."

"You know that well."

"Well, I am a member of Sakurasou after all. But Nanami will get angry. She doesn't like to break rules."

"But it can't be helped. She wouldn't follow us if I didn't say that. It's easier to bend some rules."

"Well, that might be true… but take the full responsibility senpai."

"What are you saying? We're partners in crime right?"

He noticed that it was too late.

"I'll be relying on you, partner."

Regretting that he even said anything, Sorata tried to think where he put away his swimming trunks from last year.

Sorata, Jin, Mashiro, Misaki and Nanami, the five of them met up wearing their school uniform at the front door after an hour- 30 minutes over Jin's proposed time. The reason why they were so late was because the girls said that they had a lot of things to get ready with or so they said.

The reason why they were wearing their school uniforms was because of Nanami's nagging. Sorata didn't know that there was a rule that said that you had to wear school uniform whenever visiting the school during the school holidays, but after a quick look on the student handbook, it was certainly on there.

It was over half past seven when they arrived at the school, so it was completely dark. However even with the sun set, the afternoon heat remained. Misaki was impatient, wanting to jump into the pool as soon as possible.

They jumped over the back entrance to enter the school.

“Did you really get permission from the school?”

Nanami looked at Jin with a suspicious face.

“Sorata called the school and got permission from them.”

“Yep, yep.”

Jin kindly treated Sorata as his partner in crime.

“Well I guess its ok then.

The pool was next to the gym. To get to it, they had to move behind the school building. The entrance was obviously locked, so Sorata had to jump over the fence and open the lock from the inside.

As soon as he did, Misaki ran towards the pool, flung off her uniform, revealing her pink bikini, and jumped in. Sorata was the same, but everyone wore their swimsuit beneath their uniform.

“Kamiigusa-senpai! You need to exercise before jumping into the pool!”

Nanami pointed out while standing on the diving board.

Misaki sneaked towards Nanami.

“Aoyama, you better stay away from there.”

Before Sorata was able to finish warning her, Misaki sprayed water onto Nanami’s face. Nanami, who was just splashed square in the face, grabbed a kickboard and threw it at Misaki like a boomerang.

Misaki blocked it with a chop.

“Too weak Nanamin! You’re at least 10 years too early to challenge me~!”

“Let’s see about that.”

Nanami grabbed her uniform. But at that moment, her eyes met Sorata’s and she snuck into the change rooms.

“Is my presence that bothersome? Is that it?”

Mashiro on the other hand, started to undo her buttons without caring about it, but when she saw Sorata, she paused for a bit and followed Nanami into the change rooms.

Jin was still wearing his uniform. By the poolside, he was setting up a hot pot with a portable stove that he brought from Sakurasou.

He didn’t know the reason, but at a welcoming party at Sakurasou, a hot pot was the norm. There must’ve been a meaning to it.

When Sorata noticed that Misaki was aiming for Sorata from the pool, he quickly took off his pants and shirt. He didn’t want to get wet while he was still in his uniform.

Without mercy, Misaki sprayed water at him. Sorata reached out for the hose near the pool and started fight back.

“Eat this alien! I can’t let you take over the earth!”

“It’s pointless! Kickboard cutter!”

When the kickboard hit him on his forehead, Sorata fell down on the spot,

While this was happening, Nanami came out from the change rooms.

She was wearing a blue and white bikini. The bottom was had two layers where a short shorts was worn on top.

Nanami was covering up her bellybutton area and stood in front of him.

“H, how… is it?”

“…”

“No! Don’t say anything!”

She pushed Sorata away with her hand.

“I like it. It suits you.”

“R, really?”

“Yep.”

“B, but it’s not as bold as Kamiigusa-senpai’s…. I, I did try my best though. It’s my first time wearing these. So I was worried I that I might look strange… ”

“No, it really suites you… but you’re using your dialect again.”

Sorata was quite embarrassed himself, but since Nanami was embarrassed as well, he was able to maintain his cool expression.

“I see… that’s great.”

Nanami looked satisfied as she sighed in relief.

“But it’s a bit unexpected.”

“Huh?”

“So Kanda was the type to say those things.”

“Huh? No, but… was it weird? Was it unusual?”

As he tried to talk closer to her, Nanami maintained the distance and ran away.

“… Why are you running away?”

“D, don’t look at me too closely.”

The distance was around 5 meters.

“It feels too embarrassing to be talking from this distance.”

“T, then promise me something!”

“What is it?”

Nanami looked at Misaki who was floating around in the pool.

“Don’t compare me. Don’t even think about it.”

“Alright.”

“And don’t stare at me too much.”

He liked the fact that he was close to Nanami but he wasn’t sure on what he should say, leaving a heavy silence between them.

“S, say something.”

“Even if you tell me to…”

Nanami looked uncomfortable wearing the bikini and was looking around everywhere.

“Hey… does it really look good on me?”

“Y, yeah.”

When he said that, he felt something tugging at his left hand.

Looking behind him, he saw Mashiro who just got out of the change rooms.

She silently looked at Sorata.

Mashiro was wearing a bikini as well; a white and orange chequered patterned pair. The difference between Misaki and Nanami was that she was wearing a mini skirt of the same pattern.

But rather than the swimsuit design, what was noticeable the most was Mashiro’s pale skin. Even in the dark, Mashiro’s pale skin stood out.

Mashiro’s eyes silently looked at Sorata for some reason.

“Shiina, are you ready to go in?”

“Yeah.”

Mashiro did a small twirl before Sorata’s eyes.

“Is there anything strange about me?”

“No, no… there isn’t.”

At Mashiro’s sudden question, Sorata was slightly surprised. She looked different from usual. But it wasn’t because of the swimsuit either. It was probably because she wasn’t drawing, because Mashiro looked like a plain high school student who came to play at the pool. She looked quite happy as well.

That plain look captured Sorata’s heart. He wasn’t going to be able to stay sane for any longer. He quickly looked away, but Mashiro followed his eyesight.

“W, what?”

“….”

She kept looking at him without saying anything.

“If you’ve got something to say, then say it.”

“…”

Mashiro crawled towards him while still looking at him.

“You idiot, don’t come too close!”

Sorata pulled himself up in a fleeing position. When Mashiro clung onto him, her breasts touched Sorata’s skin. Feeling the brain rattling texture, Sorata nearly screamed out loud. Somehow, he was able to hold it back and create some distance between them. But he hasn’t escaped from the danger yet.

“W, what are you doing! Are you teasing me!”

This time, she grabbed onto Sorata’s hand with both of her hands.

“You praised Nanami though.”

“What?”

“…. Sorata’s an idiot.”

After saying that, she bowed her head down. It was Sorata’s first time seeing Mashiro

like this.

“Treating me like an idiot after saying some random things, it doesn’t even make any sense. Really, how can you lack in common sense so much? How does your brain work? The swimsuit suits you though…”

Mashiro lose her head with an expression that said that she wanted him to repeat it one more time.

“It looks good on you. You happy now?”

He wanted to hide in a hole since he was so embarrassed. He looked towards Nanami for some help, but she only looked back at Sorata with a cold expression. It didn’t look like she was going to be his saviour.

But while they were at the pool side, they had forgotten about a person who they should be most aware of in Sakurasou. Both Nanami and Sorata had let down their guards while Mashiro was never on guard to begin with.

After hearing a yelling coming from behind them, they were all genuinely surprised when they were thrown into the pool.

“All of you should be swimming if you’re at a pool! This is the common sense when you’re at a pool!”

“You don’t have the right to talk about common sense, senpai!”

Sorata who surfaced first complained to her. All three of them were thrown into the water.

“Hey! Shiina?!”

Nanami has surfaced, but Mashiro hasn’t yet.

It was quite obvious. There was no way that Mashiro Shiina was able to swim. Sorata quickly saved Mashiro in the pool.

He brought her up on her feet with his hands.

At that moment, Sorata’s eyesight was focused on Mashiro’s chest. Two pretty mounds were half visible through the water.

“Shiina, your swimsuit is off!”

Mashiro slowly looked down at her chest.

“…”

There was a silence of about 2 seconds. Raising her head back up, she clenched her teeth and was shaking, trying to hold something back and she raised her hands and covered Sorata’s eyes.

“Don’t look.”

Sorata was obviously surprised when his view was blocked.

“Y, you idiot! If you’re going to cover something, then cover your chest!”

“Geez~ what are you doing Kanda!”

Nanami’s voice came from behind him.

“No! I haven’t done anything wrong!”

“I get it so don’t jump around! Mashiro stay that way as well. I’ll fix you up now.”

“Ok.”

“Kanda, if you try to peek through the gaps of her fingers, I’ll poke your eyes out.”

“I won’t! I have my eyes shut!”

“Really?”

“Just put on the swimsuit on her!”

“Actually, I just finished putting it on her.”

“Then get the hands away from me!”

At his signal, Mashiro moved her hands away.

Sorata carefully opened his eyes. When he did, he saw Mashiro with her arms crossed to cover her chest while pouting her lips.

“It was just an accident.”

“That’s why boys are the worst.”

Nanami insulted him instead.

“If that was my motive, than I would look at Misaki-senpai!”

When he said it without thinking, the person that he just mentioned, Misaki, jumped on his from behind. She was trying to take his trunks off. Sorata desperately fought her off and escaped from her grips.

“What are you trying to do to me senpai!”

“When you’re at the pool, you need to strip! No stripping! No life!”

“If you’re going to do that, please do that to Shiina!”

When he looked at Mashiro, she looked uncomfortable. He must’ve said something that he shouldn’t have.

“Sorata likes Misaki.”

“Don’t say things that can cause misunderstandings.”

“Do you look at me as well?”

“I do, of course I do.”

Just to prove it, Sorata stared at Mashiro.

When he did, Mashiro splashed water on his face.

“Don’t look too much.”

“Then what do you want me to do!”

At that moment, when Jin extended his hand of salvation saying that the hot pot was done, everyone came out of the pool. Even when they were, Sorata was able to feel Mashiro’s unhappy looks behind him.

The hot pot was hot as expected. They were dripping with sweat, but they could

always go back to the pool. Even Nanami who was against the idea was enthusiastically joining in- eating vegetables, controlling the flames and telling Mashiro not to be a picky eater.

And so, the hot pot was quickly consumed by the five of them. All that was left was the broth. While they were waiting for the rice to cook[35], someone shone a flashlight to them.

“What are you guys doing over there!”

“Ah, not good.”

The first one to respond was Jin. Everyone looked at the security guard with the flashlight. Misaki quickly got up and gathered their belongings. Sorata checked over the order they were going to run away in. The security guard was on the other side of the entrance. They were able to escape if they acted quickly.

It was only Nanami who looked puzzled in the situation.

“But senpai, didn’t you say that you got permission?”

“Ah ha, do you really think that the school would allow such a thing? But if we didn’t, you wouldn’t wear your swimsuit, so we had to lie a little.”

Jin, who just spat out his confession, jumped up, turned off the stove and started telling them to run.

Misaki who was leading them ran towards the entrance. Following behind her, Jin threw his towel around her.

“Run!”

Sorata took their belongings and started running after grabbing onto Nanami and Mashiro’s arms.

“What about the porridge?”

“If we run with that, we’ll get burned!”

“I wanted to eat it.”

“Ah~ why is this going on! I thought of Mitaka-senpai to be a normal person!”

Nanami who was now ahead of Sorata yelled out.

After exiting the pool, they headed towards the back of the school building. The security guard was fairly quick as well- he was already hot on their trail. The problem was Mashiro. She was too slow at running. It was obvious because she was just getting dragged along by Sorata.

“Run by yourself!”

“Why?”

“Somebody tell me why you don’t know!”

At this rate, they were going to get caught. Sorata sent this message with his eyes to Jin who was looking back at the group to check on them.

“Hide between the shed.”

At Jin’s commands, everyone hid between a wall and a shed. It was Misaki, Jin, Nanami, Sorata and Mashiro in order.

“Ah, Misaki, try to move in further! Don’t stick to me!”

“No~ my butt and my chest are in the way.”

Jin and Misaki who were already hidden were bickering. However, Sorata couldn’t have the time to pay attention to them. Just like how Jin and Misaki were squashed together, Sorata was sandwiched between Mashiro and Nanami.

It did feel like a lucky event, but since he wasn’t able to move around, it was like hell.

“K, Kanda, you’re too close. Don’t stick to me.”

“Even if you tell me that, don’t push Shiina!”

“Is it ok if we get caught?”

“That’s not it but, y, you’re touching my back!”

Happiness could be felt through the swimsuits. Their slippery skins were touching.

“Everyone be quiet, the footsteps are drawing closer.”

The light from the flashlight drew near towards them. They all held their breaths and waited for the security guard to pass. All of them were so nervous that they couldn’t think straight. Shortly afterwards, the footsteps stopped. It meant that the security guard was very close by.

“Is he gone?”

“I think so.”

Everyone sighed in relief. But that was only for a moment when Nanami carefully asked.

“K, Kanda.”

“W, what is it?”

“Something is touching my stomach… i, is this…”

“I can’t help it! It’s impossible not to have a reaction in this situation! Please forgive puberty!”

“Hey, be quiet. The security guard will be back.”

“B, but, t, this is.. this is…”

Nanami looked like she was about to scream.

“You can hit me as much as you want later, but for now, please calm down Aoyama-san.”

“I, I am calm. P, please calm yours down as well.”

“That’s impossible. I can’t do anything about it here…. I mean, it’s painful for me as well!”

“Do you want a hand?”

Mashiro whispered from behind him.

“What do you mean a hand!”

“To do what Sorata wants to do.”

At her ambiguous words, Sorata ended up thinking of things that what he didn’t want to at the moment.

“Isn’t there anything that you want me to do?”

“I’m begging you; please don’t make my blood rush even further!”

“Kanda, shush!”

He quickly shut his mouth. Nanami and Mashiro’s breaths could be heard from both sides of him. He was able to feel them on his back and his chest.

That minute of silence felt like the eternity. The security guard muttered to himself saying ‘how strange’ and walked back towards the pool.

“Good, so he’s finally gone. Let’s go while we can.”

Wordlessly, all of them squeezed out from the narrow gap.

“That was the worst….”

“That’s what I should be saying! T, that… that’s K, Kanda’s… that, that…”

Sorata felt sorry for Nanami who was stuttering non-stop.

“Unfortunately, the fun ends here for tonight.”

At Jin’s words, Sorata and Nanami nodded their heads. Misaki looked like she wanted to play for longer, but when Jin tried to get changed, she obediently obliged.

“But where should we get changed?”

It was too risky to go back to the change rooms by the pool. And they were behind the school building. They weren’t able to go inside the locked shed either.

“Girls go behind the shed. Sorata and I will get changed here.”

“B, but we’re outside?”

“We can’t see in the dark.”

“That’s not the problem!”

“If you want to go back to the dorm in your swimsuit, I won’t stop you.”

Jin stubbornly replied.

“Uuu.”

Nanami quietly moaned and tried to go behind the shed. As she did, she turned around and said this to Sorata.

“D, don’t even think about peeking.”

“What do you think I am?”

“You’re just a horny male. Actually, you were just until now, unless you still are now?”

Blushing furiously, Nanami nodded.

“Please don’t say anything that’s not helpful Jin-senpai! It looks like Aoyama’s about to cry.”

“Who’s crying!”

“I said about to.”

Completely oblivious to the situation, Mashiro tugged at Sorata’s arm.

“Sorata, what about panties?”

“Did you forget about them?”

Since they left Sakurasou in their swimsuits, he was expecting this to happen. He was glad that he brought them just in case.

He took out a towel and a pair of panties and gave them to Mashiro. For some reason, Nanami glared at him.

“Now now, go and get changed. If the security guard comes back, then I’ll be a pain to deal with.”

When Jin hurried them, Nanami unwillingly disappeared to the back of the shed.

“If you peek, I’ll beat you until you lose all of your memories.”

“I get it.”

While the girls were changing, Sorata quickly got changed as well.

The one who came out first all dressed was Misaki. Afterwards, Mashiro came out as well, but her hair was still damp and water drops were dripping onto the ground.

Sorata walked towards Mashiro and started drying her hair by wrapping a towel around it and patting it dry. It was like he was drying a cat after its shower.

“You really need to take care of yourself.”

“T, that’s right, Mashiro is too defenceless.”

The last one to come out was Nanami, but for some reason, her face was puffed out in annoyance.

The way that she walked was strange as well. She was holding her skirt down while walking with her legs twisted.

“Aoyama, what’s with the weird pose?”

“W, what. Isn’t it normal?”

She was clearly in denial.

At that moment a strong gust of wind blew.

“Kyaa!”

Nanami desperately held down her skirt.

“Are you alright?”

“O, of course I am.”

“Aoyama probably forgot about her panties because she wore the swimsuit beneath her uniform.”

Jin pointed out in a fun manner.

“I, it’s not! There’s no way it would happen!”

“You could’ve worn your swimsuit bottom though.”

“I did think about it, but I thought that it might be uncomfortable if I wore a wet swimsuit beneath my… that’s not it. I didn’t’ forget about them!”

“Nanamin, no panties! No life!”

“So she says Aoyama.”

“Don’t even think about it!”

At that moment the light from the flashlight shone on them. The security guard came back after doing a round around the school.

“Ah, dangerous.”

“Runaway~!”

This time again, Misaki ran off first and Jin followed just behind her.

“I, it’s impossible! Really impossible! If I run like this…”

“It would be worse if we don’t runaway!”

Sorata tugged at Nanami’s arm. But Nanami wasn’t moving because she was too fixated on her skirt.

“Surely you don’t want to be lectured while not wearing any panties!”

“O, of course I don’t! I want to wear my panties as soon as possible! And stop saying no panties, no panties!”

Nanami reluctantly started to run. Sorata held onto Mashiro’s hand and started to follow.

“N, no! Kanda, run in front! Run ahead of me!”

“I can’t see anything because it’s too dark!”

“I don’t like it!”

Since it really did look like Nanami was about to cry, he had to run ahead of Nanami. But because Nanami was still worried about her skirt, he couldn’t just run ahead of her.

“Shiina, you go on ahead.”

He tried to push Mashiro forwards. However, Mashiro looked at her clothes and shook her head.

“Sorata, pervert.”

“Not you too!”

“Don’t turn around!”

“Ok, ok.”

Since there was nothing that could be done about it, Sorata, Mashiro and Nanami ran on forwards.

They ran across the tracks and towards the main gates. It was Misaki who predicted that there wouldn’t be a lot of security at the main gates. Her prediction was spot on,

because there were no security guards around the area.

Sorata, Mashiro and Nanami all escaped through the gates Misaki and Jin opened and were able to escape safely. Even the security guards wouldn't chase them outside the school.

But they had to runaway a bit further.

When they started to slow down, Misaki and Jin quickly caught up to them.

"Sorata, I'm tired."

"Run with your own legs!"

"That's right. You need to do some things by yourself."

"But Nanami, you forgot your panties as well."

"What!"

"Ah~ guys, stop fighting!"

"Things are getting fun around here Sorata."

Jin teased him with a happy expression.

"It's not fun for me at all!"

When the group reached a small playground on their way back to Sakurasou from the school, they stopped running to take a breather.

"It was an exciting and big adventure! This is why I can't stop doing these things!"

"Please don't ever do this again!"

Nanami complained while holding down on her skirt.

"I will never forget about today. I feel like I have been commissioned to tell the world about Nanamin's no panties adventure~"

"Forget about it right now! Don't laugh Kanda, and Mitaka-senpai!"

Sorata held back his laughter while Jin laughed out even louder.

“This is the worst…. If this spreads, then I won’t be able to survive…”

“Don’t worry about it; it was only a no panties rush.”

“Don’t put funny names on it!”

“I think it’s exactly like what Sorata said. If you stick around Sakurasou for longer, these things will become natural to you.”

Nanami completely ignored it and started to walk onwards. It looked like she didn’t want to say anything. However, noticing that the road was an uphill, she came waddling back.

“Please stay in front Kanda and Mitaka-senpai!”

“Sure sure.”

Jin took big strides to move forwards while Sorata followed him side by side.

Behind them, Nanami and Mashiro were discussing something with Misaki between them.

Jin looked up at the stars and Sorata followed him as well.

The lights which were so so far away.

They wouldn’t be able to reach it even if they reached out for the stars.

So was that why the beautiful starry sky moved peoples’ hearts sometimes?

“How far do you think we can go?”

“We can to anywhere.”

“You’re being quite bold today.”

“I feel like if it’s Sakurasou, we can go to anywhere.”

Jin placed his hand on Sorata’s head.

“That’s right.”

“What~ are you guys talking about?”

Misaki came between them and linked her arms around theirs.

“Just talking about what we should do tomorrow and things like that.”

“Ah~ if you are talking about that~.”

Until they reached Sakurasou, Misaki’s idea of Summer Holidays Final Sale was presented on the road. Even though her ideas had nothing to do with a sale, nobody pointed it out.

Her ideas were things like travelling across the world or dreams that sounded impossible or too much, no one broke the mood by saying that they were impossible. They all thought that if it was them, they would be able to achieve it.

While listening to Misaki, they all felt like they were dreaming.

But that dream had to end when they reached Sakurasou.

“Kanda, there’s a letter for you.”

Nanami who checked the letter box handed over the letter to Sorata. It was something that he didn’t recognised. He thought that it was the result from the「Let’s Make a Game」competition.

He ripped the envelope open.

There was only a sheet of paper that had been folded twice times vertically. He thought that it was a letter of failure. With a disappointed heart, he looked at the letter.

-- Teach me about love.

On the middle of the letter were those words written horizontally.

He couldn’t understand what was going on. No, he did think of something. Mashiro mentioned that she was going to write him a letter. This must’ve been it.

All strength escaped from him. He wasn’t even in the mood to get angry.

Nanami came back to Sorata.

“Kanda.”

“What?”

“There’s one more.”

On the envelope that she held out, he saw the company name for the organisers of 「Let’s Make a Game」 competition. The slim paper envelope suddenly felt heavier.

This time, he carefully opened the envelope.

Dear Sorata-sama.

We hope that you are well.

We would like to say thank you for sending in an entry for the 「Let’s Make a Game」 competition. After checking over your submitted entry, we have decided to hear more about your entry in a presentation. We apologize to take up some of your valuable time, but we would like you to arrive to the set time, date and place as printed below.

Thank you.

Below, there was a list indicating that the date of the presentation was on the 31st of August, on a Tuesday from 1:30PM as well as a map of the company’s location. There were also some specifications of the computer available at the presentation.

He read the letter once more from the top. There was no mistake about it. He passed the 1st round of the judging.

Being overwhelmed with the result, Sorata acted by his instinct and cried out at the top of his voice.

“Whoo hoo~!”

Being surprised, Nanami who was close to him let out a small cry. Misaki and Jin looked at the letter.

“Oh~, you’ve done it Kohai-kun!”

“It’s thanks to you senpai.”

Misaki shook hands with Sorata energetically.

“Nanamin said that she’ll give you a kiss as a present!”

“I, I won’t!”

“Even just on the cheeks?”

“The place isn’t the problem!”

“You got rejected Sorata.”

“It seems like it…”

“W, why are you so disappointed!”

“No, if you decline it so furiously, I just thought that you must really hate me….”

“No. I don’t hate you or anything, but… it’s…”

“Never mind. Now that I think about it, because of me, you were dragged into Sakurasou, went through all kinds of trouble and got the name no panties rush.”

“I told you forget about it! Ah, now that you mention it, I haven’t.”

Nanami hurriedly went upstairs. She must’ve wanted to put her panties on.

But Mashiro wasn’t here either.

“Where’s Shiina?”

“Who knows? Maybe she went back to her room?”

“I guess so…”

Sorata was still over the moon. He probably misunderstood, thinking that Mashiro was actually happy for him.

He checked over Mashiro’s letter once more.

All that was on it was just one sentence.

-- Teach me about love.

But Sorata didn’t have the leisure to think how he was to interpret that sentence.

Chapter 4 - Let's Set Off Some Huge Fireworks

Part 1

His body felt heavy. It was because he was dragged around here and there last night by Misaki for passing the preliminary judging. Thankfully, he was saved half way thanks to Jin, but it was nearly dawn when he came back.

Using the radio exercise music that was being played from a nearby primary school as a lullaby, Sorata slowly fell asleep.

He wondered how much time has passed since then.

When he woke up, his body was feeling stiff all over. He felt really heavy. There was a pressure on his stomach. His chest felt tight. This was definitely because he felt pressured about the presentation. There weren't many days left. Today was the 27th. He only had 3 days to prepare. Would he be able to pull it off well. Would he be able to meet the deadline. What exactly did he need to do for the presentation.

He was at complete loss. But he felt that it was ok. He was able to pass the preliminary judging. He should be able to believe in his idea. He was told that the judges wanted to hear more about the idea in more detail. And it was for his first ever game proposal.

He might have the talent for it. That might be the case. In a series of events, it might actually be accepted and developed into a game. It might actually turn out to be a hit.

So there's no need to feel pressured.

Even though he thought along those lines, his body didn't feel any lighter at all.

Instead of getting lighter, it felt even heavier. Was there a cat on top of him? Thinking that, he could recognise the little rays of sunshine shining on him with his half awaken brain. Ahhh, I'm not fully awake yet, he thought. But then he felt some warm energy being emitted on to hi with his skin.

Some weight on his stomach. The surfaces that were in contact with each other felt warm and moist. It was something physical. There was something on him. Instead of the pressure from the presentation….

Sorata opened his eyes, wanting to see who was on top of him.

A pair of emotionless eyes looked down at him. The pyjama clad person was sitting on his stomach. The brush in her hand was hovering on top of Sorata's head. It was barely teaching his forehead.

"Is this a dream?"

"Hello."

"Tell me that this is a dream!"

"It's a dream."

"If it's a dream, then let me wake up!"

He was slapped by Mashiro. The sound rang out through his room. After about a minute, the searing pain hit him.

"What did I do to get slapped by you? Huh? What did I do wrong?!"

"Look at the reality."

"I am looking. When I woke up, Mashiro Shiina from room 202 was on top of me in an embarrassing situation! What are you doing! Why? For what reason? And what's with that brush?"

"To scribble."

"What for!"

There was a limit to Sorata's ability to understand.

"It was Sorata's fault. For making me feel like this…"

Mashiro placed her hand on her chest and looked away. Her eyes slightly shook.

"Over here wasn't feeling well since yesterday."

It was probably because of the pool incident. Now that he thought about it, Mashiro's condition was strange, telling him to look and then telling him not to look.

“What’s wrong?”

“When I think of Sorata.”

“What?! Me?!”

“Yes, Sorata.”

“S, so? When you think of me?”

“I get extremely annoyed.”

“What are you saying to me!”

So was that why she came to his room early in the morning: to draw on his face. Logically, it was understandable, but he still didn’t know the reason, and her way of venting out her annoyance was strange.

“Your actions are even more spontaneous than normal! It feels like seeing pineapples in sweet sour pork[36]! Anyway, could you get off please?”

She was probably still annoyed, because she got off him with a frowning face. It felt like something very dangerous would happen if he moved, so he stayed dead still until she got off.

Mashiro looked down at him.

“Sit down.”

“Yes, yes.”

Sorata sat down with his legs crossed.

“Kneel.”

“Can I hear the reason?”

Mashiro’s eyebrows twitched. Her expression was a lot darker… no, it was probably his fe… no, a lot darker…

“You’re not sure?”

She looked unsatisfied.

“Maybe you’re hungry?”

And this time, Mashiro’s cheeks puffed up. It looked like she was angry.

Mashiro went and got the game proposal on his desk and pushed it towards Sorata.

“What about it?”

“You didn’t tell me.”

Mashiro looked straight at him.

“I didn’t even know about it.”

“Didn’t… I?”

He tried to think back. He certainly didn’t remember showing the game proposal to Mashiro before. He didn’t even tell her that he was working on it. He didn’t even discuss about it.

She probably only new about him entering the audition. Actually, he couldn’t even remember if he told her or not. Even if he did say it, there’s no guarantee that Mashiro actually listened to him.

He could understand up to that point. But Sorata, not being able to understand Mashiro’s annoyance, tilted his head.

Mashiro pointed towards the illustration on the game proposal.

“Misaki’s drawing.”

“I asked her to do it.”

“Why didn’t you ask me.”

“Well it was because Misaki-senpai knows a lot more about games, and Shiina looked busy with your names, so I didn’t want to bother you.”

“I don’t think of Sorata as a bother.”

“R, really?”

“Yep.”

Mashiro was still pouting. She was way too cute.

“Did you want to draw it?”

Mashiro nodded her head.

“When it comes to drawing, I’m the best.”

“Well… you are.”

-- I’m the best at drawing.

Mashiro had the talent to say that without exaggerating. He really thought that it was amazing. It showed that Mashiro knew exactly who she was.

-- What are you?

If someone was to ask that question, how would Sorata reply. There would be no answer. Because he wasn’t even sure. But for Mashiro, she had a reply. And that was what pushed Sorata down.

She was probably angry at the fact that Sorata didn’t ask her to draw the pictures for him or even discuss about his entry.

“Sorata.”

“If you’ve still got things to say, then I’ll listen. Tell me everything.”

He didn’t know if he’s done the right thing or not. But he could only listen to Mashiro for now. Thinking that to himself, Sorata decided to listen to Mashiro till the end.

“Am I angry?”

“Don’t ask me!”

“What should I say next?”

“You’re really saying some ridiculous things today!”

As expected of Mashiro Shiina. It was impossible to understand her with commonsense alone.

“Tell me.”

“…… Maybe you should say something like「I hate you」?”

He felt like she was now a lost cause.

“Sorata.”

“What is it?”

“I hate you.”

Mashiro glared at him while pouting

What should he do. It came. It really came. It wasn’t scary or anything like that. It wasn’t scary at all. It was just so damn cute.

“Don’t smirk.”

“Sorry.”

He desperately regained his composure.

“Look at me.”

“Don’t say such reckless things!”

If he looked at her face he would probably lose his composure.

Mashiro looked even unhappier.

“I want to draw it next time.”

“Ye, yeah.”

“Promise.”

She extended her pinkie finger to him. Sorata shyly turned away his head and hooked his finger around hers.

“I’ll forgive you.”

“Well, thanks.”

“For teaching me about love[37].”

Since he wasn’t paying attention to the conversation, Sorata choked on his own breath. But he somehow calmed himself down.

“They are a type of fish often found in ponds and lakes, and some colourful carps’ value depends on its colour, some of them reaching hundred thousands or millions of yen.[38]”

With a serious face, Mashiro started to take notes.

“You don’t need to take memos! Did you want to learn about fish!”

“The one who said it was Sorata though.”

But it was you who brought up the topic……

“Please make my heart beat faster.”

“Don’t say that so boldly.”

“Set my heart alight.”

“That’s an impossible task for me.”

“Do your best.”

“Sometimes, you should stop cheering people on! And why did you ask about love?”

“Ayano told me.”

“When’s the next time that she’s coming? Can I complain to her then? Why do I have to be the victim every time Ayano suggests something to you?”

“For a love story, love is the best.”

“Is that so.”

“She said that anyone can write a love story at least once in their life.”

“That editor, she can really say some embarrassing things.”

“She blushed.”

“That was probably because she came back to her senses after seeing no changes to your expression.”

It looked like the editor was a victim as well. So he decided not to complain to her.

“When was your deadline again?”

“There’s a meeting to decide the serialisation on the 31st.”

It was on the same day as Sorata’s presentation.

“Are you going to work on your name now?”

“I’ve already done three chapters worth.”

She picked up a thick stack of papers which was beside her and placed it in front of Sorata. He flicked through them. It looked really complete. No matter how much he saw them, her drawings were really amazing.

The plot was about living in a shared house with 6 arts university students, all of them excelling at something. It was about the males and females getting on together, discussing about their love worries and growing onto each other. It had that sort of a feel to it.

“Hey.”

“Why?”

“Something about this feels really familiar to me.”

“Ayano told me. To try to use Sakurasou as a model.”

He guessed as much. The plot was slightly altered, but the characters looked a lot like Misaki and Jin.

Set in the future, if the students at Sakurasou all graduated high school and entered

Suimei's arts university, it might be exactly the same as Mashiro's manga. But thinking that it was an impossible future, Sorata felt slightly sad about it.

Looking at the appearing characters, he's heart started to ache. Feeling that something was wrong, Mashiro poked her head out towards him and asked.

"Isn't it interesting?"

"No, it's interesting."

Wanting to stop being so worried about it, Sorata raised his head.

The manga itself was quite comical, so it was easy to follow along, and the pacing of the chapters was fast, matching today's trend. If he had to pick out a fault, it would be that it didn't have enough drama in it. It was slightly lacking considering that it was a shoujo manga[39].

So he could understand why Ayano suggested adding more romance and had said that anyone could write a love story at least once in their life. And that was why Mashiro said such a ridiculous thing.

"So please teach me about love."

"It's too hard! And I need to work on my presentation!"

There weren't that much time until the presentation date.

"It's alright."

"What is?"

"I'll help you."

"It's ok! I refuse!"

"Why is it so noisy from the morning?"

From the gap between the door, which he had left open for the cats, Nanami poked her head through. She was wearing her glasses and a tracksuit. She was always wearing those in Sakurasou.

“Mashiro, you came into a boy's room looking like that again. That won’t do.”

Nanami walked into the room.

“Why?”

“Well, because… boys are erotic creatures…”

Her voice got smaller and she looked towards Sorata.

“Don’t stereotype me for all the males in the world!”

“Now, Mashiro should come and get changed.”

“No, I still haven’t learnt about love yet.”

Suddenly, Nanami stopped moving. And she threw daggers at him.

“No, it’s nothing like that!”

“Th, then what is it? It’s not like I thought of anything that men and women do together… just, I didn’t think that it was good…”

“I didn’t say anything like that!”

“A, anyways! You should be more protective about yourself Mashiro. Shouldn’t walk into a boy’s room so defensively. It’s dangerous.”

“Aoyama, could you refrain yourself from saying that to my face?”

“And Kanda needs to prepare for his presentation right? You shouldn’t be bothering him now.”

“I didn’t bother him.”

To confirm it, Nanami looked towards him.

“Well, it wasn’t really… a bother, but.”

“But?”

“It wasn’t a bother.”

"… If you say so."

It looked like she wasn't able to accept his answer.

"If…"

"Yeah?"

Nanami cutely turned away her head.

"If there's anything that I can do to help, then tell me."

"It's alright."

"Why are you answering Mashiro!"

"Because it's alright."

"T hat's~ right, that's~ right, I'm the one who shall play with Kohai-kun~!"

Misaki came in kicking down the door.

"Please don't make this even more complicated senpai!"

"I've always thought that puddings were meant to be drunk!"

"Let's organise our topic! Are we pigs or people! Yes yes, I'll ask a responsible person for help during my presentation preparation. It's enough! You don't need to worry about me, so everyone get out!"

He kicked out Misaki who was still complaining, Mashiro and Nanami from his room.

To fix the door that Misaki broke, Sorata looked around for a screwdriver.

It was going to be problematic if he didn't start his presentation from today. But he wasn't even sure on what he was supposed to do. He turned on the computer and sat down. He started to type away on the keyboard.

-- Akasaka, is this a good time to talk to you?

-- Ryuunosuke-sama is currently thinking seriously about「What would happen if you open a fridge that opens both left and right at the same time?」so he is busy. I

apologize, but Sorata-sama's message won't be answered.

The one who replied was Maid-chan.

-- That guy thinks about that kind of stuff……

-- That was just a joke Sorata-sama. A joke. It was just Maid-chan's joke.

Was that something like an American joke. Sometimes, he didn't know what to think about the electronic maid.

-- It's ok even if it's Maid-chan as well.

She was the one who taught him about writing a game proposal properly, so she would probably teach him on how to do a presentation well.

-- What kind of punishment should I give to Sorata-sama who uses words like 「it's ok」 and 「even if」 and make him disappear? (Lol)

-- You already punished me enough!

-- Oh my, for me to make such an error. I accidently revealed my true thoughts.

It looked like he was on Maid-chan's black list.

-- Did I do something wrong?

-- People tend to hurt each other without realising it.

-- I didn't know. I'm really sorry.

It was going to be terrible if she sent a virus, so he quickly apologised.

-- Gee, Sorata-sama. You're always talking so happily with Ryuunosuke-sama. And his handsome smile that he makes when he's chatting with you is so attractive… He never makes that kind of an expression when he's with me, hu~! It makes me angry! I won't hand Ryuunosuke-sama to you!

-- Um, I'm sorry for asking you right after that declaration of war, but could I discuss something with you.

-- What is it Kanda. You being polite really piss me off.

The speech was completely reversed. It looked like the master has descended.

-- Please don't swap at the worse timing. It makes me want to kill myself.

-- So, what do you want?

-- It's about the presentation, the presentation!

-- Did you pass the preliminaries?

-- Thanks to you.

-- If you didn't pass even with my advices, I was going to bomb you with viruses.

-- Please hold it in.

The master and the maid were alike.

-- But presentation you say…

-- I would like to receive some advice, teacher.

-- I've only got one thing to say.

-- Hoo, what is it?

-- Wear a suit. That's it.

-- Is that it!

-- What did you expect from me, who knows almost nothing about communicating with others?

-- No, you're not wrong, but…

-- It's all about experience. Try practicing with the Sakurasou members. Thankfully, it's full of unique characters.

-- Thank you for your great advice.

With that, Ryuunosuke's icon switched to absent.

All he could do was to depend on the people who'd been staring at his back for a while.

Looking behind him he saw 6 eyes… no, now it had increased to 8 eyes, at the door. It looked like Jin joined in as well. As he walked towards the door, it opened.

"What are you going to do Kanda?"

"Should we help you?"

"I'm sorry for chasing you out before. Please take care of me."

He bowed his head.

"Weak, Kohai-kun~. Not it's the start of the training camp!"

"Well do your best."

And so, Sorata had to practice his presentation to the members of Sakurasou.

Part 2

The presentation practice was decided to be held each night after dinner. Thanks to Chihiro joining because it sounded fun, there were 5 people in the audience.

The kitchen table was used as the judging panel. Mashiro, Misaki, Jin, Nanami and Chihiro sat in that order and he practiced his presentation using the white board and his game proposal pages that he stuck on.

It was actually harder than he'd thought. He didn't know how to manage his timing and he was already done in 5 minutes when he actually had 15 minutes to elaborate. For the second time, it took him over 20 minutes. He got used to the timing the third and fourth time, but it was still not enough.

Even though he knew the content well, what he said out loud was out of order and was just ramblings. He repeated saying「Eh~」or「Uh~」countless times and he felt pathetic.

After almost 2 hours of practice, Chihiro said this.

"Try to explain you points by introduction, body and a conclusion so that we can understand clearly."

"Kanda, you're too nervous while you're trying to talk to us."

"How should I say it~ it's different from the usual Kohai-kun, so it's boring~"

"You're explaining yourself using complex words, so it's not fun at all."

Nanami, Misaki and even Jin's criticism were voiced out. Mashiro was unable to deal with Sorata's boring presentation, so she started to sleep halfway through.

The first day of practice was his complete loss. Sorata panicked, because he never knew that he could be so pitiful.

The next day, Sorata started to practice his presentation from the morning, and he prepared some cue cards. He took on Chihiro's advice and wrote down the introduction, body and conclusion so that it was easy to follow. Depending on the

situation, he switched some of the orders around on his proposal, and he organised which points that he was going to use.

Jin's criticism was also spot on. It was something that he felt as well. If he wasn't talking in his usual tone, he wasn't able to talk properly. He felt frustrated because he wasn't able to express his tension and idea well. But he could only get used to the tone, because that was the only way to perform properly.

The other problem was the nervousness. Talking in front of people that he knew made his heart beat faster and mumble his words. To solve this issue, he went to Nanami for advice.

"You just need to practice so that you can talk even when you are nervous."

It meant that since it was difficult not to get nervous, just practice so that you can talk even when you're nervous.

He took on advice straight away.

"And since it sounds boring if you're talking in monotone, why don't you change your tempo and tone?"

Said Nanami. Mashiro actually used his presentation as a lullaby and fell asleep. Now that he thought about the classes that he normally fell asleep in, there certainly was a shared point.

He wanted to take on the advices on board and improve his presentation by the date. That was his goal.

When he tried to resume his practice using the cue cards, the door suddenly opened. There were no knocks.

Turning around, he saw the pyjama-clad Mashiro. She walked in as if it was her own room, and leaned on Sorata's back who was working on his presentation on his bed. She wordlessly took out her sketchbook and sketched away at it with her pencil. Every time she sketched the lines, the scratching sound made by the pencil and the paper could be heard. It looked like she was working on a new character design.

She didn't respond to Sorata's stare.

"Eh~, hey there, Shiina-san."

Even when he said her name, she didn't respond.

Not being able to do anything, Sorata worked on his own work again.

After 5 minutes or so, Mashiro responded.

"Why?"

"Uh, what was it? Ah, that's right. What happened to my privacy?"

She came into his room without permission and she even ignored him when he was talking to her…. He started to suspect his own existence.

"It doesn't exist."

"I see, so it doesn't exist. I thought as much."

"It exists."

"Then let me ask you something, where is this? And what are you doing?"

"Sorata's room. Character design."

"You've got your own room. You always worked in your room."

"I want to work in this room from now."

"Right, then can I ask for the reason."

"That's…"

Mashiro bit on her pencil and started to think.

"Don't ask 'Why?'."

He used his past experience to limit her answer.

Then Mashiro who was about to say something stopped.

"Was that what you were going to say!"

"No."

“Hoo. Then can I ask for the reason once more.”

Since he was correct the first time, feeling a bit more confident, he asked again. But he didn’t know what she was going to answer next…

“If I work here…”

“If you work here?”

“I think I can find out about love.”

“What?”

Did she just say find out about love? And that was why she was working in Sorata’s room…. But why in Sorata’s room… Why. For what reason. Could this be…

No, no, now isn’t the time for that. He had things to do. He can’t get distracted now. He was able to pass the preliminary judging. He had to do his best for the presentation.

“… I can’t stay here?”

“N, no... that’s.”

“I can’t stay here?”

Finding it hard to look at her face, Sorata looked away.

“Aoyama will get angry again.”

“Then I’ll stay here.”

Mashiro declared boldly.

“What?”

“… Sorata is always caring about Nanami.”

“What are you saying?”

“I don’t know.”

Still leaning against his back, Mashiro concentrated on her character design. The sound of her drawing, it felt sharper than before.

“I don’t mind you being here.”

All he had to do was to think of Mashiro as a giant doll, since she was so quiet. It wouldn’t bother him with his preparation. So Sorata decided to leave her alone.

But it wasn’t easy not to react when a girl that you’re interested in is sitting right next to you.

Mashiro could’ve been doing it unconsciously, but she often sighed out loud. He didn’t know if it was because her character designs weren’t going well or if there was another reason, but it distracted Sorata continuously.

And so, he subconsciously started to observe Mashiro.

Mashiro kept switching her pose while on the bed; sitting with her knees to her chin or stretching her legs out while leaning on the wall. When it got worse, she laid flat on the bed and started to shake her legs. One thing that didn’t change was that she was continuously drawing. And that sometimes, their eyes would meet. Sorata looked at her first and Mashiro noticed him or it was the other way around.

“Why are you looking?”

“I’m not.”

“Liar, you looked.”

“You looked as well.”

“I didn’t.”

“Don’t lie.”

“I didn’t.”

“Well neither did I.”

“……”

“W, why did you stop talking?”

“That’s not manly.”

“Don’t make fun of me!”

And the sun went down while they were chatting away.

Nanami who came back from her part time job said that you brought some doughnuts as a present outside the door. Since the door was open, Nanami’s sight fell on Mashiro who was on the bed.

“How many times do I need to tell you…”

“Welcome Nanami.”

“Yeah… is not it! Really, why do walk into a boy’s room looking like that Mashiro?”

“Because Sorata won’t pick out my clothes.”

“Why is that my fault!”

“And why won’t you say anything Kanda? You really are a pervert.”

“I don’t think in that way!”

“You really don’t?”

“Yeah, and as a proof, she was with me since morning, but nothing has happened!”

“Hmm~ so you were together for all that time.”

Nanami’s voice suddenly got cold.

“H, huh? Did I do something wrong?”

“I shouldn’t sit still, not doing anything.”

Her voice was too small for Sorata to hear properly.

“What?”

“Anyway! Mashiro, come with me upstairs!”

Nanami started pulling at Mashiro’s hand.

“H, hey.”

“You need to practice your presentation today as well don’t you? Hurry up and prepare!”

“Y, yeah.”

“I won’t listen to it.”

“Let keep personal life and work separated!”

The next day, and the day after that, Mashiro came into his room each day and leaned on his back while he was working on his presentation and done her own work. And each night, they would be told off by Nanami who returned from her part time job, and Mashiro would be dragged upstairs.

Sorata looked at the situation warmly and he practiced the presentation with Sakurasou members as the audience each night. And each morning, he would use what he had learnt from the previous night to improve his presentation.

The sun rose and set again.

And so, the 31st of August, the day for Sorata’s presentation, Mashiro’s serialisation meeting and the last day of the summer break has arrived.

Part 3

On the decisive day, he was on the edge from the moment he woke up. It looked like his nervousness has reached its peak after slowly rising since the time he passed the preliminary judging.

Sorata opened his eyes, but didn't even attempt to get up. He also ignored the cats who were rubbing against him asking for food.

Lying on his bed, he recalled his presentation from the start to the end. Even when he made the smallest mistake, he would start all over again. He repeated that seven times.

It's ok. He had done what he could've done. He was now fully prepared.

Even when he encouraged himself, his lower body was aching because of the uneasiness.

Sorata finally left his room when it was past 10 o'clock.

He fed the cats in the kitchen. The seven cats innocently ate away at their breakfast. Watching them blankly Sorata took a bite from his toast.

Sakurasou was quiet and he couldn't feel anyone moving about.

Jin slept over at a 4th year acting student, Asami's house. Nanami was at her part time job. Chihiro was probably at the school. If Misaki was quiet, it meant that she was sleeping.

Mashiro was probably still asleep under her desk. She was working on her names to present at the serialisation meeting that was going to be held today until late last night.

Sorata realised that everyone had their own things to do today, and he was very grate full about it. It would actually feel like a burden to him if they were to care about him.

Sorata left the cats and returned to his room.

He took his time getting ready.

The suit that was hanging on the curtain rails was something that he borrowed from

Jin. He said that it was a gift given to him by the racing queen, Suzune, when she invited him to a restaurant. The size was slightly big, but he wasn't in a situation where he could complain.

He wore the stiff collared shirt. He buttoned the shirt to the very top. When he wore a tie around his neck and put on his pants, he felt even more nervous than before. No matter how much he examined himself on the mirror, he looked nothing more than a child on his Shichi-go-san[40]. When he started this 3 days ago, he only brought laughter to the Sakurasou residents.

He decided not to wear the jacket but bring it. If he did, he would've been drenched in sweat by the time he got there.

He checked the time on his phone. It was time to leave.

He checked if he had his cue cards inside the bag and he slung it on his shoulder. Sorata took a deep breath and walked towards the door.

He bent down and tied up his shoelaces. His hand started to shake already. After tying them up, he got up and slapped his cheek.

"Sorata."

Mashiro came down from the stairs and stopped Sorata.

She was wearing a t-shirt with a camisole one piece that Sorata picked out for her before. It looked like he combed her usual bed hair by herself.

When he turned around, Mashiro pushed something into Sorata's chest.

While trying to grab it, his fingers touched Mashiro's.

Opening his hand up, he saw a charm for passing. It was something that the shrine about 30 minutes from here sold. He often saw people buying charms from there who wanted to get into Suimei Arts University.

"How did you get it?"

"I went there yesterday."

"Did you ask Aoyama?"

“Why Aoyama?”

Mashiro looked slightly unhappy as she looked at Sorata.

“Huh? Then don’t tell me, you went there by yourself?”

“I looked for it and asked people for directions. I walked a lot.”

Now that he thought about it, Mashiro only came into his room in the evening. He thought that she was busy working on her name, but it looked like he guessed wrong.

“Ah, sorry, I don’t have anything to give back to you. Today is the serialisation meeting day isn’t it.”

“It’s ok.”

Before he could continue to talk, Mashiro’s hand wrapped around Sorata’s right hand. She closed her eyes and stayed in that position as if she was briefly praying.

She said yes while nodding and let go of his hand.

“I don’t know why you said「Yes」, but it doesn’t really matter does it…. Anyway, thanks for the charm.”

Sorata couldn’t face Mashiro straight, so he looked towards the shoe rack.

“I’ll be off.”

“Come back safe.”

Hearing Mashiro seeing him off, Sorata walked out of the door. He clenched his hand with the charm inside. Calming down, he pocketed it in his back pocket.

Catching the train at the station, it took about an hour to get to Shinjuku. From there, he transferred trains and went to the「Let’s Make a Game」company building.

On the train Sorata transferred onto, he didn’t sit on one of the empty seats, but stood near the sliding doors. It was because of the uncomfortable feelings that he got on his thighs whenever he sat down.

Every time the train passed a station, that feeling grew and now, it has settled in his core.

He couldn't ignore it nor forget about it. He wasn't able to accept it either.

The announcement inside the train rang out the name of the next station. It was the one Sorata needed to get off on.

It felt like someone has tied a knot around him, and Sorata felt tightened.

He's heart wasn't ready.

But the train was on schedule and stopped at the station.

The door opened. Sorata came out, pushed and pulled by the wave of people getting in and out.

He checked the yellow sign for the exit. The company's name could be seen on the yellow sign.

He silently started to walk towards the way the arrow pointed to.

He walked up the stairs. He passed the ticket validating gates, and walked up the stairs again.

Walking up the third set of stairs, he exited the station. Before his eyes was a building over 30 stories high. It was sparkling in the sun because of its glass exterior. He was worried thinking that he might not be able to find the building, but his worries were pointless. On the centre of the building, the company's logo was stuck on. It was Sorata's destination.

The first floor was well visible from the outside. Two security guards at the automatic doors. White tiling. And 3 pretty ladies at the information desk wearing a white uniform. They were greeting the visitors without dropping their smile.

Towards the closer half of the floor space, there were stylish tables and chairs where some well dressed businessmen were discussing something together.

Towards the back, there were the elevators. But before the elevators, there was a gate that looked like the ticket validators at the station. People were passing through after scanning a card on it. It must've been the security system.

A shock that Sorata never had felt before hit him.

--This is bad. This isn't somewhere that I should be in.

He had no allies. He was separated. He was afloat. When he realised that he didn't belong here, he got even more nervous. His stomach started churning badly.

One of the security guards looked at Sorata who was standing blankly at the automatic doors with a suspicious face. Embarrassed, Sorata wore the suit jacket. And with a challenge mindset, he walked inside.

The cool air-conditioned breeze welcomed Sorata as he walked in. However, instead of him sweating less, he sweated even more. He thought if he really was in the right place. He wanted to run away at full speed.

He was worried that he might be stopped by the security guard but that didn't happen.

Just when he thought that he was safe, his eyes met with one of the information desk ladies. She was smiling brightly, so he didn't know where to look at her. Which one should he talk to.

"Hello, how can we help you today?"

The middle lady asked kindly.

"Ah, that's… I, no, I… came here to present my「Let's Make a Game」proposal.[41]"

He wanted to hide in a hole. The other two ladies slightly smiled. Anyone could see that he was being very awkward.

"Then could you write your name here please?"

The information lady handed him a form and a pen. His forehead was covered in sweat. He wrote his name in the space. Even though it was a name that he's written over thousands of times, it came out in scribbles. Under the company's name, it was left blank. Under the requiring person's name, it was left blank as well, but when he filled out only his name, she took the form from him.

"Then Kanda-san, please wear this."

It was a necklace type ID; it looked like she was able to read his name at least.

“One of the representatives will come down, so could you wait at the table please?”

She pointed at the stylish tables.

Beside her, another lady was on the phone, calling someone out. It must’ve been the representative.

As instructed, Sorata wore the ID around his neck and sat down at the tables. He sat up straight and waited patiently.

He let out a big sigh.

He tried not to look around. If he did he would feel even more out of place and get stomach aches again.

The sound of the elevator arriving rang out slightly far away from him.

The sound of footsteps came closer.

Looking up, he saw a lady wearing a pants and a suit looking at him.

“Are you Kanda-san?”

She looked like she was in her late 20s. She had some light make up on, so she looked neat.

“Ah, yes.”

“Then I’ll show you the way. Please follow me.”

Even her way of talking was quite cool.

He got up and followed her.

They passed the security gates which looked like ticket validators. Since he saw a different person pass through these before, he wasn’t too surprised.

When the elevator opened, Sorata got in first.

There were buttons reaching up to 36 floors. The female worker wordlessly pressed the 25th floor button.

The elevator went up without shaking around and the sound of its arrival rang out.

“This way please.”

Sorata got off first this time as well. As he stepped out, he gasped without meaning to. The carpet was so soft. Was he really allowed to walk around with his shoes on[42].

He was guided to the 7th meeting room. There were already two people who were wearing suits. They wore the same ID as Sorata. They were here for their presentation.

Then a male representative came out called out one of their names and lead him away. He could tell by their expressions. This was the time for the presentation.

“Please wait here.”

He sat down at the centre of the meeting room. The other person was silently meditating.

The female representative stood near the door to act out if something went wrong.

Sorata included, the room was quiet enough to hear their own breaths.

And after a few minutes, the presenter in front of him got called out as well.

What happened to the previous person. He didn’t return back to the room yet.

No, now wasn’t the time to be thinking about others. He had to focus on his own presentation.

He closed his eyes, but he couldn’t think of anything. He couldn’t think of anything that he’s been preparing for at all.

This was bad. His body was reacting to his thoughts. His stomach hurt. His insides were churning. He wanted to run away.

“U, um, excuse me.”

“Yes, what is it?”

“I would like to go to the toilet…”

“I’ll show you where it is.”

She replied with a caring smile, but Sorata couldn’t respond the same way; he was too nervous to.

It felt like his view as a lot narrower than usual. His body felt afloat. It didn’t feel like his own body.

The toilet that he was guided to was so well kept, it sparkled. He didn’t have the confidence to pull his pants down in a place like this, so he went to a cubicle.

He was expecting himself to get nervous. It would be strange not to be nervous. He also expected himself to be out of focus. But right now, it was at least 10 times worse than he ever expected.

The time for his turn came closer each second.

He griped the charm inside his pocket.

He couldn’t get a disappointing result.

He got up. The toilet flushed by itself.

He washed his hand and rinsed is mouth. He straightened his crooked tie and tidied his hair and came out.

When he returned to the meeting room, a man dressed all black like a shinigami[43] was waiting for him. It was the representative who lead the previous two away.

“Kanda-san, it’s time, so please start preparing for your presentation.”

“Thanks for letting me know.”

Good, he said it properly. His voice didn’t shake.

He came out of the meeting room. He walked down the long hallway.

Towards the end of the hallway, there was a door that said boardrooms that waited for him.

The male representative knocked on the door.

“I’ve brought Kanda-san here.”

“Come in.”

There was a mumbled reply through the door.

The representative looked back at Sorata and said

“Then good luck.”

And opened the door for him.

When Sorata walked in, the door closed behind him.

The room with the intimidating name on the door was twice as large as the meeting room. It was about twice as large as his classroom. It was long. There was a large screen at the front. Next to it was a laptop to control the projector. It probably meant that he was to present his presentation there.

There were 5 judges. They were sitting in a row. Four of them were wearing suits. He recognised the man in the middle. He was the CEO of the company. Whenever there was a game show or an E3 Expo, he often came up to explain about his company’s new games and consol.

He didn’t know the others. No, he knew the person furthest to the right. He was the only one who was wearing casual clothing. And he was just wearing a t-shirt. He was one of the game creators that won the「Let’s Make a Game」competition with an action puzzle game. His name was Kazuki Fujisawa. He was a Suimei University of Arts graduate and a game creator who still continued to produce games that were a hit.

“Kanda-san, please start.”

The one who said that was the one furthest to the left. He was old enough to be his father. So it was strange for him to be addressed that way, and Sorata had to think about what he heard.

“Pardon?”

“Please start.”

He was in a completely different world.

“Ah, ah, right.”

He walked forwards. There was a small platform so his field of view suddenly became larger.

He could see the five judges clearly.

The three of them looked quite bored. And he couldn’t really tell what the other two were thinking.

“Then I will explain about my game plan first.”

Even though he was still very nervous, Sorata was able to voice himself well. He spoke too fast, but it wasn’t displeasing to hear. His voice came out normally as well.

Thanks to Nanami’s advice, he was able to speak even when he was still nervous.

He politely explained about his game concept first. And he elaborated on the target and the game structure. He continued on controlling his voice and his tone as he spoke.

When he was explaining about the benefits, he used body motion to express the players’ emotions to supplement his ideas.

He did well for the first 5 minutes, despite being nervous.

So when Sorata grew confident and looked down at his notes that he wasn’t looking at until now, he saw the judges’ faces that he was trying hard not to look at.

Their eyes met. All of them looked discomforted. They had their arms crossed with a troubled face. Their reactions were bad. One of them looked down on their paper work and didn’t move.

His confidence that was growing inside of him was instantly stomped down, and Sorata was unable to maintain himself.

Everything went blank.

His sight and his head.

He couldn’t remember what he had to say next. But he had to turn the page. He had to somehow turn it. No, all he had to do was to pick up from where he’d left off. But

even if he did, their discomforted expressions won't change. Then what should he do. Sirens started to go off in his head. Red lights were flashing brightly.

And because he was in that state, he couldn't remember what he said next.

He could remember what he said towards the end. He read out what he wrote on the cue cards. It was all thanks to his practices. Even when his head was in shambles, his body remembered the final lines.

There were three questions during the Q&A.

One came from the CEO while Kazuki Fujisawa asked two.

He couldn't even remember what they asked and how he responded.

"The time is up. Then we shall finalise Kanda-san's presentation."

Sorata bowed in response.

Judging the situation, it was almost impossible to expect a positive feedback.

But he had enough for now. The result would come to him via the mail within the next few days. He just wanted to leave the room as soon as he can. He wanted to run away from this company. He wanted to take off his tie. He wanted to go back to being his usual self. That's what he wished for.

"Kanda-san."

The one who spoke to him was the CEO.

"First of all, thank you for participating in「Let's Make a Game」."

"No, thank you for give me some of your time."

The CEO responded with his eyes.

"It is a shame to say this, but I feel that it would be difficult for the game to be developed."

"……"

What did he just say?

“Right… is that so.”

It felt like someone other than himself was responding by itself.

He bowed his head once more and Sorata left the boardroom. He caught the elevator together with the male representative how lead him there and went down to level 1. He went through the security gates once more. He returned the ID to the information desk. He left the building with the male representative giving him a 90O bow.

He quickly went down the stairs at the train station. He didn’t want to be seen by anyone else. He wanted to runaway to somewhere.

He didn’t expect them to tell him on the day. So he wasn’t even prepared for it. He thought that he could feel glad that he got it out of the way and reward himself….

And what was that attitude. That discomforting feeling when an adult talks politely to you. Even the CEO talked politely to him. Was that what business was like. Being a member of the society.

Ryuunosuke told him not to look at himself as a high schooler. It felt like he could finally understand what he meant. It was completely different from school.

He was too prideful for passing the preliminary judging. He misunderstood, thinking that his idea was actually of interest.

His sadness and other feelings that were hard to describe crashed onto him like a wave. Sorata who didn’t know a way to run away, or deal with it was swept up by that wave.

Before him was nothing but the darkness.

Part 4

It was a little over 6 o'clock when he got off at the station in front of the university.

Since it was summer, it was still bright. Like a shadow, Sorata silently walked towards the exit. He stumbled along the shopping district.

On his way, the fishmonger shouted at him

"Heh, isn't that the Kanda kid! What's with the get up!"

Even when the fishmonger teased him, Sorata couldn't respond at all.

When a lady at the butcher said

"My my, is that you Sorata. Wow, I almost didn't recognise you. If I was only 20 years younger~"

He wasn't in the mood to play along with her joke.

Lots of other people spoke to him on his way home. But Sorata could only respond by waving his hand back at them. He couldn't even remember half of the people said to him.

Normally, it took 10 minutes to walk back, but this time it took him over 30 minutes to arrive at Sakurasou.

When he wordlessly opened the door and tried to walk in, he stopped. He didn't even want to say that he was back. He had the responsibility to tell them his result. After all, they did help him prepare by giving him a few hours out of their own time every day. But did they want to hear this unpleasant news? It made him feel bad about it.

What should he say? Sorata didn't walk in, but walked towards the backyard. He sat on the veranda and looked at the bright sunset.

It dyed his body red. His body was covered blood red. There wasn't a place on him where his body wasn't red.

What he done wasn't enough. It didn't reach them.

The sun went down completely.

Even if his ideas didn't reach the judges, what Sorata presented today was his best. He wasn't slack about it. His preparations were perfect and he was confident about his game idea. But it just didn't work out. That was the result, and that was it.

"… Kuh."

He bowed down holding onto his forehead.

The insides of his nose started to sting. His eyes felt hot.

He didn't want to cry like this.

So he desperately tried to hold back his tears.

Even though he gave it his best, it wasn't enough and he couldn't see where his presentation reached up to. There were no visible guidelines to tell him how much he was able to achieve and how much there was to go. Sorata couldn't think of anything to say to himself like 'you can do it next year'.

"Sorata."

"……"

It was Mashiro's voice. It was a voice that he could recognise anytime.

Sorata couldn't lift up his head.

"Sorata?"

"I'm back…"

He could only say that back to Mashiro who wore a troubled face.

"Welcome back."

Mashiro approached him on the veranda. Sensing that, Sorata quickly tried to start up a conversation first.

"How did it go with your serialisation meeting?"

“It got serialised. It’s being published from the November issue.”

“I see. Congratulations.”

“Yep. Thanks.”

As expected of Mashiro. She was able to produce the results.

She had the talents that no one was able to mimic, and she was using her talents to improve herself further.

What was so different between me and Mashiro? He knew at least that much. Mashiro has been living like this all this time. She lived while being judged by others. She got hurt countless times but still got back up and tried again and again. He has seen her do it before.

She had the will to continue onwards and to continue without giving up. She wasn’t stopped by the inflicted pains. So Sorata and Mashiro couldn’t be compared at all- of course, in terms of skills as well.

“Then you should draw.”

“Yeah. Chapter 1 manuscript and the next names.”

“You’re going to be busy then.”

“… Yeah.”

Mashiro shouldn’t know Sorata’s result yet.

Mashiro tried to sit next to Sorata.

“Don’t stay here, but go and draw.”

“But…”

“Shiina.”

“Yeah?”

“This isn’t the way onwards.”

Mashiro stopped.

"I see…"

Turning back, Mashiro left him. He thought that it was better if Mashiro went somewhere far away if he wasn't able to reach her anyway. If being next to her on equal ground was impossible, then it would be better if she was somewhere far far away, where there was no hope of reaching her.

Sorata, who'd been left behind, silently apologized to the charm that he received from Mashiro. Right now, even being with Mashiro was painful. Mashiro might not mean it, but Mashiro's existence itself was criticizing Sorata. When her eyes looked at him, he felt like he should've tried harder since a long time ago. He wanted to run away. It felt like he was starting to hate Mashiro.

Ah, I see. So this was it.

It felt like things that were once blurry and out of focus were now becoming clear.

So this was what Jin meant.

Sorata was finally able to understand the depth of the pain. No, he could understand it slightly, but not fully yet.

It was far. Too far. To Sorata, Mashiro was almost like a star to him. It wasn't a distance that was reachable by stretching out his arm. He was able to see it, but the distance between them was too far. Thinking of it like that, it felt like his will was about to get broken.

Thinking of all this made him feel strange and it felt like his head was about to split. He might actually start to hate someone that he likes. But he didn't want that so he put a distance between them.

It was obvious for Jin to be troubled about Misaki. Even Jin couldn't do something about his feelings over time.

There was no clear answer about it. Sorata covered his face with both of his arms.

A shadow drew closer to him.

"You can cry you know."

It was Nanami who stood next to him.

Sorata looked up pretending nothing was wrong.

“I’m not like Aoyama, so I won’t cry.”

“Wh, what’re ya saying. I was just.... I’m sorry that I cried back then…”

“Sorry, I’m only kidding. Thank you.”

“You should’ve said that first, really…”

“Hey, Aoyama.”

“What?”

“It’s hard being honest.”

“Yeah, it is.”

“I can’t run away from the regret or the disappointment.”

This loss wasn’t anyone else’s fault. The responsibility fell all on him and he didn’t prepare half heartedly. He faced it head on with all of his strength and he was shattered mercilessly.

“But I like people who live with an aim. And people who work hard as well…”

His eyes naturally drifted towards Nanami’s face.

“Wh, what’re ya looking at?”

“…… No, I’m just glad that Aoyama is here.”

“Wh, what are you saying…”

Nanami bowed her head and crouched down.

“No! I don’t mean it like that but…. What did I say again?”

“Ha~, you should really work on fixing that.”

“No, what I meant was… I just wanted to say that I feel better thanks to Aoyama.”

“Ok, ok. I got it.”

“What’s with that attitude- treating me like an idiot.”

“Ah, you noticed?”

“Tsk…. And I was actually being grateful to you.”

Sorata really did feel better. He wasn’t able to laugh like this near Mashiro- her presence was suffocating.

But Nanami was different. He didn’t really understand it, but he felt at ease being by her side.

“If you say that, then I won’t really get happy.”

Nanami pouted and pressured him with her eyes.

“Then what do you want me to say!”

“Think of that for yourself.”

“I guess you’re right…”

“Are you really ok?”

“Ah, I feel much better now.”

“What do you mean?”

When he thought of his failure at the presentation, he felt thwarted. He wanted to wipe off today’s memory completely. But there was only one way for him to overcome this disappointment, and he learnt it from watching Mashiro before. The only way to forget about that feeling was to continue trying harder.

In the near future, if he was mature enough, he would be able to shrug off that disappointment.

Realising that, he could feel a small seed of hope growing inside his upset heart.

Until now, he was never able to see how high the hurdles were. By presenting his ideas in front of adults, he was able to see the goal that he wanted to reach.

He didn't get the full view of it, but he was able to get a glimpse of his goal. The size and the greatness of that goal became Sorata's motivation to succeed.

"Wow… I feel a lot happier."

"Kanda, you were a M[44]."

"Hearing that makes me happier than being called normal."

"Wow, you're the real deal. As expect of a Sakurasou resident."

"Aoyama is also a Sakurasou resident now."

"Ugh, that's right…"

He looked up at the sky. Sorata decided to move on forwards a step at a time.

Nanami glanced towards the veranda. Did she need something from him?

"You seem to be really bothered by it."

"What?"

"I'm talking about Mashiro."

Hearing that, Sorata looked around and saw Mashiro inside the building, looking at the two of them. When she realised that she was noticed by Sorata, Mashiro crouched down. And she continued to peek at them.

Nanami signalled to Mashiro with her hands.

"You're ok now, right?"

She asked him quietly. Sorata could only reply back yes. Nanami could understand him perfectly, and he couldn't hide anything from her.

"But were you watching before?"

"What do you mean?"

Nanami pretended not to know on purpose. Judging from her reaction, it was safe to assume that she was watching Sorata and Mashiro's conversation before.

Mashiro waddled towards them.

It looked like she wanted to say something, but didn't say anything.

So Sorata opened his mouth first.

"I didn't make it this time. I'll try harder next time though."

"Yeah."

Mashiro replied and nodded her head.

She didn't say anything else. But her response was more than enough. His heart felt a lot lighter. Now, he didn't feel anguished by Mashiro being near him.

"So, you're all ok now?"

At Nanami's question, Sorata and Mashiro responded wordlessly.

"Then it's my turn."

Saying that, Nanami looked straight at Mashiro and

"I won't lose to Mashiro."

Declared just like that.

Mashiro's eyes became slightly wider in surprise. But her usual expression returned and said

"I don't like losing."

Replied quite clearly.

Sorata misunderstood them completely.

"Yep, me too."

"… We don't mean it that way."

“Huh?”

“It’s nothing!”

“Why are you getting angry?”

“Who’s getting angry!”

“You just got angry!”

“I’ll kill you!”

“What, why!”

“Sorata’s an idiot.”

“I don’t want to hear that from you Shiina!”

“Heh~, Kohai-kun, welcome back~!”

Misaki, wearing a happi[45] ran outside. She was hugging an incredible amount of fireworks in her arms.

“Oh, you came back Sorata?”

Jin poked his head out through his window.

Not reading the mood, Misaki ran around handing out some fireworks to everyone. She was fully prepared with the lit candles and a bucket of water.

“If it’s summer, it’s all about fireworks! You shan’t end the summer without fireworks! The summer can end! So we’re going to set off some fireworks~!”

Saying that, Misaki lit up some rocket-type fireworks, and they shot off from their cylinders.

Jin came out from his room, opened a packet of fireworks and lit them up.

Nanami who looked like she had something to say kept saying,

“Well, who cares.”

She was teaching Mashiro, who clearly hasn't played with fireworks before as expected.

"You shouldn't let off fireworks with them pointed at people."

"What about Sorata?"

"I'm also a person!"

Sorata also lit some fireworks. Colourful sparks flew out from the tip and lit up the dark sky. Everyone was laughing and they looked happy. Seeing them all joyful also made Sorata feel happier.

Chihiro was drinking beer on the veranda, and the cats were cautiously poking their head out.

"Now it's time for this!"

What Misaki took out from her happi was a melon sized ball shaped thing. It had a string sticking out from its coarse surface.

He had seen it before. It was a proper firework.

While everyone was stunned at the sight of it, Misaki used that time to rush over to a prepared firework stand and threw the ball in it. And she lit it up.

"Wait senpai!"

Sorata was too late when he yelled out.

As soon as his words left his mouth, the ball flew out from the cylinder and soared to the sky. With a ‘Phe~w’ sound, it continued to climb and when that sound stoped, it exploded in the clear summer sky.

Jin put on a bitter face. Nanami wasn’t able to close her wide opened mouth. Misaki yelled out ‘Now this is a firework~’ and Chihiro spat out her beer. Mashiro was emotionless as usual and looked up at the bright light.

Being right beneath the firework explosion, there was a loud bang. The shockwave and the noise came crashing down on them. The power of the explosion could be felt with their bodies.

Sorata carved the sight of the bright blooming floor in the night sky into his heart. It was a part of his valuable summer memories. Jin, Misaki, Nanami and Mashiro probably done the same as well.

The firework that dominated the night sky dissolved away into the night, and the night sky regained its silence.

Instead, down at Sakurasou, Chihiro’s voice rang out to them.

“All of you stand up straight in a line!!”

31st of August.

The following was written on Sakurasou's meeting report.

-- We played with some fireworks. They were pretty. Recorded by- Mashiro Shiina

-- Next time you ‘play’ with something, always get permission from Chihiro Sengoku! I know that you guys snuck into the pool as well! Recorded by- Chihiro Sengoku.

Author's Notes

By the time this novel hits the shelves, I would be celebrating something that I don't really need to count anymore- my 32nd birthday. What I mean by that is, 16 years has passed ever since that time when I graduated from middle school and started to wear China collared uniforms.

When I was in my high school, I couldn't imagine myself in my thirties, and likewise I really can't believe that I used to be a teenager. No, really….

I hope that the me from back then wouldn't be disappointed by the way that I am now.

Leaving that aside, how did you find volume 2 of「Sakurasou no Pet na Kanojo」that I wrote using my very aged brain? I hope you enjoyed it. If you didn't…. Then I don't want to think about it.

The name「Sakurasou」, which is also part of the title, was a name that I chose just because I liked the sound of it and after searching on the net, it seems like there are actually a lot of dorms with the same name all over the country. It's not like I based the name off of them though….

Maybe there is a Sakurasou near where you live.

If you're asking what the point in saying that was, I'm just saying it for no reason.

I just want to use this opportunity to thank a few people.

To the readers who sent me letters, thank you. I really don't know how I can thank all of you. I will read them over and over again to motivate myself to battle the blank pages again.

Also, to the designer T, thank you for working on the image data for the game proposal. And thank you to Keeji Mizoguchi for the pretty illustrations and the editor

Araki as well.

Then I will see you all again in the next book during the summer.

Hajime Kamoshida

References

1. ↑ Nabe- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nabemono
2. ↑ Legendary snake like cryptic creature - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tsuchinoko
3. ↑ Raw thinly sliced fish
4. ↑ Nanami Aoyama- 青山 七海literally means blue mountains and seven seas. (In Japan, they used to only have one word for the color range from blue and green, thus they still refer to mountains as blue.)
5. ↑ Number 1 spot of the grade level
6. ↑ Manga manuscript. For more info, read Bakuman
7. ↑ Art stand- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Easel
8. ↑ Rough and nude sounds the same
9. ↑ In most Asian countries, bowing to someone shows respect or apology
10. ↑ She said it in a different style than what she normally used
11. ↑ Doraemon
12. ↑ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hiraga_Gennai
13. ↑ Said in English
14. ↑ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manzai
15. ↑ M-1 Grand Prix, an annual manzai competition with a 10 million yen prize - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M-1_Grand_Prix
16. ↑ Nanami uses a dialect
17. ↑ You would know if you have ever eaten melon breads before
18. ↑ A ghost made up by adults to warn kids so that they don't waste food
19. ↑ Skirt crossed with pants.
20. ↑ Manga drafts
21. ↑ All three of them were said in English
22. ↑ lit. "Strength of a Thousand"
23. ↑ There's an urban legend that says that there will be only three times when you are popular with the opposite sex.
24. ↑ Ryunosuke Akutagawa- a Japanese author regarded as the "Father of the Japanese short story"
25. ↑ Ryuu part of Ryuunosuke uses the kanji of a dragon.
26. ↑ Manga aimed at females
27. ↑ Approx $33783.90USD
28. ↑ Said in a dialect

29. ↑ Said in a dialect
30. ↑ You should know what this is. Seriously
31. ↑ Airport in Tokyo
32. ↑ Airport in Sapporo
33. ↑ Sapporo is famous for their crabs
34. ↑ Nagasaki is famous for their noodles
35. ↑ After a hot pot, you add rice to the broth to cook some porridge type food or some fried rice depending on the amount of broth left
36. ↑ Seeing something unusual in something
37. ↑ Pronounced koi
38. ↑ Carps are pronounced koi as well.
39. ↑ Shoujo manga- manga aimed for young/teenaged females
40. ↑ A ceremony celebrated in Japan for girls when they are 3 and 7, boys when they are 3 and five. The name literally means 7-5-3.
41. ↑ The first time he said I, it was said informally. The second time he corrected himself and said it formally.
42. ↑ In Japan, people normally take off their shoes in their houses. Since the flooring looked too clean, Sorata felt guilty about stepping on the carpet with his shoes
43. ↑ God of Death. Grim Reaper is similar to them
44. ↑ Masochist
45. ↑ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Happi

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